Newly Expanded

Artifacts of a Troubled and Troublesome Species

Titles Reviewed and Stories by Peter McMillan

Flash! Fiction (2012) by Peter McMillan

Flash! Fiction 2 (2013) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Flash! Fiction 3 (2014) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Flash! Fiction 4 (2015) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Flash! Fiction 5 (2017) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

An Anthology of Hardly 20/20 Flash! Fiction (2020) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Missing Stories: An Anthology of Hardly 20/20 Flash! Fiction (2020) by Peter McMillan & Adam Mac, Maku Miran (ed.)

Collected Essays on Political Economy and Wartime Civil Liberties, 2002-2008 (2020) by Peter McMillan

Willowing Skywardly: Stories and Essays (2022) by Peter McMillan

Flash! Fiction: Around the Block (2022) by Peter McMillan

Writings Near the End of the Human Era (2023) by Peter McMillan

Eclipsed (2024) by Peter McMillan

2025

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Peter McMillan, 2025

Editorial Cartoons

Telnaes, Ann. Rough of cartoon refused publication by the *Washingtop Post.* See artist's January 3, 2025 Substack article 'Why I'm quitting the Washington Post: Democracy can't function without a free press' at https://anntelnaes.substack.com/p/why-im-quitting-the-washington-post. Accessed April 22, 2025.

Alcaraz, Lalo. This cartoon appears courtesy of Lalo Alcaraz and *CALÓ News*. https://www.calonews.com/multimedia/lalo-on-cal-protest-coverage/image_cf45b665-768a-4359-ba3f-712a8e9dec29.html. Accessed June 11, 2025.

Contents

Artifacts of a Troubled and Troublesome Species	ii
Books Published by the Author	iii
Peter McMillan	iv
Copyright	v
Acknowledgements	vi
Contents	vii
Introduction	1
Titles Reviewed	3
PART ONE — FICTION	5
The Good Samaritan (September 2024)	6
Together Time (September 2024)	12
Election Night (September 2024)	18
The Barbershop (December 2024)	22
Imperial Musth and the Gifted Brain (March 2025)	27
Only in Amerika (April 2025)	34
PART TWO — NONFICTION	36
The Disastrous Relationship Among Israel, Palestinians and the U.N.: Interview with Aslı Ü. Bâli on May 17, 2024 (July 2024)	37
Reviewing *The Constitutional Bind* (August 2024)	44
Reviewing 'The Watcher' (September 2024)	54
Reviewing *The Remains of the Day* (September 2024)	62
Reviewing *Adults in the Room* (October 2024)	69
Reviewing *Trust* (October 2024)	76
Letter to Vice-President Harris (October 2024)	83
Reviewing *Technofeudalism* and *Another Now* (November 2024)	85
Letter to President Biden (November 2024)	92

Reviewing *Worldmaking After Empire* (November 2024) 94

Reviewing Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law (November 2024) 100

Reviewing Two Books on the Origins and the Peace of World War I (December 2024) 105

Reviewing *Autocracy, Inc.* (January 2025) 110

Reviewing 'Amazon's Antitrust Paradox' (January 2025) 116

Reviewing *Origins of Totalitarianism* (February 2025) 123

Letter to Canadian Foreign Minister Joly (March 2024) 129

Reviewing *The Jungle Grows Back* (March 2025) 132

Reviewing *The Lumumba Plot* (April 2025) 137

It Didn’t Come From Nowhere (April 2025) 144

Reviewing The Unaccountability Machine (May 2025) 152

Reviewing *Abundance* (May 2025) 161

Reviewing *Through the Grapevine* (June 2025) 167

Reviewing *Hayek’s Bastards* (June 2025) 175

Letter to Prime Minister Carney and Minister Anand (July 2024) 180

The theme of the writings presented in this collection is history, sometimes fictions but mostly opinions based on the interpretation of facts—real events, real people, real places and 'real' ideas.

Included in this volume are 30 short pieces—six flash fictions and 24 nonfictions. (The last three are new in this newly expanded edition.) The nonfictional writing consists of book reviews along with a few letters to North American political leaders, which, realistically speaking, may have only ever been read by a junior staffer.

The subject matter of the nonfiction is largely political and the topics broadly fall under the category of governance and freedom within the state and sovereignty in international relations. There is a fair bit of history and political theory in the books as well as in the reviews. Their accounts and explanations are shaped by facts and opinions, and, of course, values. The same applies to the reviews.

Writers from every age have thought of theirs as something special in the history of humanity. We're no less presumptuous. To hear us go on about it, one would think that most human history of any consequence has been recorded from the modern era. What we judge important now may be reassessed hundreds of years from now. We'll never know how. What we do have are artifacts that give some sense of what some people were thinking and doing during our time. To the future 'us', it may be laughable, grotesque or—pity the age—viewed with envy.

Below the level of political labels, there lies something much more fundamental to our species. In *Rebellion*, Robert Kagan expresses this pithily: "Once they [immigrants] attain these goals, however, their fervor for liberalism has often faded. "I've got mine" is among the most basic of human sentiments." Not for a minute do I believe

Kagan's remarks to be limited to newly immigrated folks. He's talking about us, our kind, our species. And as you read these authors' works for yourself, you will find that there are many other 'sentiments' that we have in common irrespective of race, religion, language and a host of other identity markers.

———

This collection does not presume to be a definitive, comprehensive or even necessarily representative body of artifacts. It is an eclectic accumulation of interpretations of how certain people live and think in this part of the world—North America—at this time as collected by a curator of no particular renown. And with the exception of a short story by Italo Calvino and a sociopolitical treatise by Hannah Arendt, that time is the early 21st century.

A list of the titles and authors of the texts reviewed follows on the next page. It is hoped that this will be helpful to the reader in choosing what, if anything, to read beyond this Introduction.

The author's short fictions in Part One constitute his contribution.

Peter McMillan
Oakville, July 2025

The Constitutional Bind: How Americans Came to Idolize a Document That Fails Them, Aziz Rana

‘The Watcher,’ Italo Calvino

The Remains of the Day, Kazuo Ishiguro

Adults in the Room: My Battle with Europe's Deep Establishment, Yanis Varoufakis

Trust, Hernan Diaz

Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism, Yanis Varoufakis

Another Now: Dispatches from an Alternative Present, Yanis Varoufakis

Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination, Adom Getachew

Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law, Antony Anghie

The Guns of August: The Outbreak of World War I, Barbara Tuchman

Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World, Margaret MacMillan

Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World, Anne Applebaum

‘Amazon’s Antitrust Paradox,’ Lina Khan

The Origins of Totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt

The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World, Robert Kagan

The Lumumba Plot: The Secret History of the CIA and a Cold War Assassination, Stuart A. Reid

Rebellion: *How Antiliberalism is Tearing American Apart—Again,* Robert Kagan

The Unaccountability Machine: Why Big Systems Make Terrible Decisions – and How the World Lost Its Mind, Dan Davies

Abundance, Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson

Through the Grapevine: Socially Transmitted Information and Distorted Democracy, Taylor Carlson

Hayek's Bastards: Race, Gold and the Capitalism of the Far Right, Quinn Slobodian

Walter wasn’t looking forward to the walk. It was warm, very warm, and the moist air was thick. It would be raining soon. He hated walking in the rain—not so much walking in the rain but having to clean up afterwards. Maisie was a big girl and she had long hair that trapped all the wet and grit from the sidewalks and road, and it all had to be washed out before he let her back in the house.

They'd both come up with the name when they bought their first car together, a sporty, low budget Mazda. If you met it on the road it looked like it was smiling at you. 'Maisie' just seemed to fit. But Maisie didn't last too long. During a heavy early summer thunder-storm, an overhanging maple branch fell on her in the driveway. Totaled. Devastating. She'd been so much fun to drive, Walter kept saying, but Bob never liked driving a standard and was pleased they had an excuse to buy a new car—this time with an automatic transmission. It just made so much more sense, Bob said, when he was driving to work in stop-and-go traffic.

The new car was actually an old car—a Subaru. Walter hated it and refused to name it. He'd always named his cars—something he picked up from his granddaddy on his Mom's side. He'd always called his car 'Lizzy' no matter whether it was an Oldsmobile or a Toyota Corona hatchback. Said he'd always named his mules the same back when he farmed the red clay in Blue Springs. Walter had a different name for each car. There was Ethel (hardly original) and Gertrude (where'd that come from?) and then Lizzy (the little white Corolla, his 'toy motor' that reminded him of the old dark green Corona his granddaddy and Ralph used to take to the Fort Gaines Lake to go bass fishing. But this one went unnamed.

'Maisie' was the one name that he had really liked, and when they picked up their new little girl at the airport that name just seemed

perfect. No matter that it was a hand-me-down. Maisie was part of a compromise. Bob got an automatic transmission and Walter got a puppy. Some people don't think dogs smile, but they don't know dogs. This little girl—only 15 pounds at the time—had the cutest, goofiest smile even at 10 weeks. Maisie . . . a perfect name.

Every rainy or soggy day was a full bath day, and that's what Walter dreaded. But that was part of the bargain, too. If there's to be a dog in the house, the dog's got to be clean.

Ever since the pandemic, Walter had been working from home, and now though his job had changed a couple of times, he was still working remotely. Taking care of Maisie would just never have been possible before.

Three years and 60 pounds later, she was still a handful—a Peter Pan puppy—and as an adult with a fully developed long nose and a long narrow pink tongue about six inches too long she'd crack you up with her smile. But things had changed at home. Bob had moved out.

Walter and Maisie kept their routine, but they got relaxed with it. Maisie didn't get full baths as often, and Walter didn't shave every day. On those days when he wasn't on camera, nobody even noticed.

In her fourth year, Maisie presented with horrible environmental allergies. Her paws were raw, itchy and red at their worst after walking outside. Walter tried a number of meds but nothing was working. That's when he had to step up and be Maisie's caregiver. He'd doctor her paws daily with diluted Chlorhexidine or give her a footbath in Epsom salts, rub coconut oil on the skin between her pads and toes and put socks on her overnight. This went on for six months—through the hot summer and a snowless fall and early

winter. She was such a good patient, but he wasn't always the good doctor, and he always regretted it later. Once the ground was finally covered in snow in late January, the skin healed and the fur grew back in.

By the end of the following year, a new vet and a new treatment had brought Maisie's allergies under control. The verdict wasn't pronounced until the end of that summer, and it had been another long summer, as Walter had been doubtful that they'd ever find a long-term treatment.

By the time Walter and Maisie stepped off the driveway and onto the sidewalk, the rain started coming down in buckets. A full bath day for sure. No shortcuts today. The girl had to have her walkies. The ancient posties' motto was his: "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night." And so they went, through the park across to Sunset and back by way of Sawyer and Sandalwood. Only 45 minutes today, and she was on the deck getting a thorough down-to-the-skin bath with oatmeal shampoo. It was a three-towel job. Followed up by the hairdryer (set to cool) to dry between the toes and pads—a tip he'd picked up from another dog walker back during the bad days.

* * *

Rarely was there anything unusual, let alone exciting, going on during their walks. Dog walking banter is inescapable and often painfully drawn out—much more for Walter than Maisie for whom most of the chatter meant absolutely nothing. However, squirrels in the park, and their constant chatter were always exciting for Maisie. Seventy-five pounds of solid muscle could yank your limbs out of joint if you were caught daydreaming. And it also happened more than a few times with little yappy dogs and the occasional off-leash dog—sometimes with and sometimes without the owner—but mostly with the ubiquitous Golden Retrievers.

Around the corner, a new 4,000 square-footer was going up. Madame Merde's house knocked down and carried off in bits in just two days. Kind of ironic to see a colossus being raised on the grounds that were home to someone for more than 40 years. A grand monument to some new homeowners' forever dream . . . maybe. Two houses down in the opposite direction, is the first big box house in the area. This is the gas house, so monikered because the first owners were executives with a giant engineering firm. That was only 10 years back and there've since been four different sets of owners, and none of them REITs.

The sound of Spanish marked this new build on Madame Merde's ruins. Lately the government had been mining human resources in Central America on behalf of the booming housing industry. There's a seemingly endless supply of cheap and disposable labour that can be flown in and out on an as needed basis. Once in a while, and then only for a day or so, you might see a union organizer's information notice posted in multiple languages on a construction fence. These notices never made to the litter stage as so much else did.

Just as Walter and Maisie were turning the corner, the guys, six of them, were raising the first wall. For no particular reason other than idle curiosity, Walter stopped to watch. The wall was slowly and steadily raised to about 60 degrees . . . then it abruptly went in reverse slipping on the concrete foundation and crashing down. Five guys were left standing there, dazed. One guy pulled out a cell phone and was talking to someone—more with his hands than his voice it seemed. The others had moved to the far side of the house and were looking down at something.

It was the sixth man. He was down. Not moving. The Spanish grew louder and frantic. Walter yelled across, holding up his cell phone, asking if they needed help. The guy on the phone ran over and

said, “Please, please,” as he passed the phone over to Walter. It was the 9-1-1 operator on the line. Walter finished the call. He had virtually no Spanish—just one year in junior high school—so to make up for it he spoke in a louder voice, letting them know the police, fire and EMTs would be there in ‘*minutos*.’ And they were. The injured worker had blood on his forehead but he was conscious and was able to walk to the ambulance without assistance.

The police shut down the site for two weeks. The same guys came back but this time with bright yellow hard hats and work boots, and there was now a crane on site to position the walls. Walter had waved a couple of times to the guys when passing the site. It had only taken them about a week-and-a-half to finish framing the entire massive structure—nail guns and power saws running without pause. Then, it was off to build another big box house.

He wished he had checked to see if the injured man had returned, and couldn’t understand why he hadn’t asked. He’d been pleased enough with himself for stepping in to make the 9-1-1 call, so why hadn’t he show any concern? That kind of flattened him. He wondered what the men must have thought of him, a white guy, probably rich and comfortable, who didn’t have time or thought for migrant labourers. He decided it was best not to tell anyone about making the 9-1-1 call. Better to forget about the whole thing. No credit but no blame.

It nagged at him for the next several days. “What kind of person am I?”, he asked. “What must others think? Am I passing people every day without leaving a trace?”

“Good morning!”

“Who said that?” said Walter to himself as he looked around. He and Maisie were halfway up Sunset.

“Over here.”

“Oh, hello.” Walter pretended to recognize the little old man. He wasn’t sure that he did. He thought he’d seen him before sitting out on his front porch squeezed between two largish pots of red geraniums. But he seemed to recall that there’d been a couple.

Maisie smiled up at him. And she must have been really happy, because it was as if she had two tails.

Do you remember the vacation we took along the Atlantic Coast on our way back from my parents?

Yes, I do. But tell me what you remember. My throat is still sore.

Well, we drove across Georgia to Savannah and spent the day there. Had a terrific seafood dinner. I think I had swordfish and you had—

No, you had swordfish in Washington. You had shrimp and grits in Savannah. I'll never forget that. You loved your grits, Georgia boy.

Oh, was that when you got so sick?

Yeah, that's when I found out I was allergic to shellfish.

Was it bad . . . your reaction I mean?

It was unpleasant but I was alright the next day.

That's when we drove up to Myrtle Beach. The beaches were empty.

Well, it was just after Labour Day, and it was cold and windy.

But I still went swimming.

Yes, you did. You were like a little boy diving into the waves coming ashore.

Did you come in?

No, my stomach was still uneasy.

After that was it Washington or Delaware that we went to next?

Washington.

Were you feeling better by then?

Yes, but we did a lot of walking.

Did we ever find that Thai restaurant I told you about? The one from when I went to the Peace Corps orientation.

No, but we did get lost. We ended up getting something at a burger place. Some cowboy name.

Roy Rogers?

Could be.

Was it good?

Better than the shrimp and mussels.

Was that the time we stayed in an old downtown hotel and next door they were knocking down a high-rise?

Yeah. The all-night wrecking ball. Quit trying to sleep around 5 a.m.

And then we drove across to one of the beach towns in Delaware. It was dead there, remember? I forget the name, but we stayed at a place with an oceanfront view. Remember?

I can’t think of the name of the town either. We weren’t quite on the water, but we were close . . . maybe just a block or two away. It was a quaint older place, not as fancy as those hotel condos. The waitress told us about it. And it was blessedly quiet.

I think I had salmon there and it was the best I'd ever had.

Actually, you had tuna.

Tuna, really? Like Starkist?

No, silly. This was fresh tuna and you said it made you rethink how you felt about tuna.

Oh, I remember now. . . . It looks like you have another 30 minutes.

Could you ask the nurse for some more ice?

To eat?

No, silly, I don't have horse teeth like you. I need more ice for my fingers and toes.

OK. Actually, I'll go to that little refreshment cubbyhole they have for patients. There's an ice dispenser.

Better to have the ice that comes in these little sealed bags, but thank you.

You sure? I don't mind.

Serena'll be back soon.

Serena? I thought she said Sabrina.

No, I'm pretty sure it's Serena.

That's funny. I'd thought she was the first Sabrina I'd ever met. Remember *Bewitched?*

You probably liked her. She wasn't the blonde Elizabeth Montgomery.

I always preferred the colour of your hair.

There's not much left anymore . . . but I could get a wig.

If you want, but it's ok if it's—

Gray?

Yeah.

So, where do you want to visit once I'm better?

Well, you know how I feel about traveling.

But you said I should go back to Rügen.

You should.

I would love to. I remember feeling so at home there. The language, the sea air, the villages, and the people . . . not so petite as here. Not fat, mind you. Large-boned.

What about Minnie? You'd enjoy her company. Forget Gabi; she'd talk your ears off. Maybe Giseli?

No! I don't think they'd enjoy it so much, besides I'm not sure we'd get along that well for two weeks.

I can't think of anyone else, can you?

Just you, you big dope!

I don't speak German. For goodness sake, I don't even have a passport anymore.

Get one. It's not a big deal. Get a Canadian one. There’s no need to make a stopover in the U.S.

Serena steps in.

So, how are you feeling?

Pretty good, thanks.

Did the extra saline infusion help?

Yes, yes it did. It was much better than last week.

Good. I'll put that in the notes for the doctor. Looks like you have . . . let's see, another 15 minutes and you'll be done for today.

Thank you, Serena.

We were just talking about you.

Ah! That's why my ears were burning.

It's all good, Sabrina.

Serena! *(to Serena)* He misheard your name.

No problem. Sabrina might have been my first choice if I'd been there.

Everyone laughs. Serena steps away.

That REALLY was funny!

Don't be silly.

He fumbles in his pockets for his cell phone.

First published in *Down in the Dirt*, February 2025, vol. 228.

Four brains-in-the-vat awaiting the results of an election.

> ***Yolo*** *– cynical, but ready for anything; Cassie's antagonist*
> ***Cassie*** *– older, cynical brain; dislikes Yolo*
> ***Mort*** *– fatalist ready to give up*
> ***Sol*** *– intellectual skeptic and voyeur who doubts everything*

Mort: We can't vote; we're brains-in-the-vat; we're property and whoever heard of property rights including the right to vote?

Sol: Quite right. And property rights belong to people not property.

Cassie: Even if we could vote, our votes wouldn't matter. There are too few of us.

Sol: We don't know how many of us there are, *ergo* we don't know whether our votes would matter.

Yolo: Wouldn't it depend on whether we all voted the same way?

Mort: We're brains-in-the-vat, of course we'd vote the same way.

Yolo: You sure about that? I actually like the orange men.

Sol: You're kidding, right? You **still** have a brain, just no body.

Cassie: A feverish brain. Isn't that the word *du jour*–fever dream?

Yolo: Hey, don't be insulting old one. Listen, I'd like to watch what happens if the orange men win. They're so unpredictable. It'd be chaos and great fun to watch.

Sol: Would you think it amusing if they cut our funding?

Yolo: No. Nor if they started brainwashing us, but—

Mort: What makes you think we've not already been brainwashed?

Yolo: Well, for one thing we're still free to 'talk' like this without fear of punishment.

Mort: If life as a BIV isn't already punishment enough, what more could I possibly have to fear?

Yolo: Sheer boredom? An eternity of the same old same old?

Cassie: Yolo, have you ever woken up and felt completely alone, isolated, incommunicado? Or found yourself suddenly foggy-brained and confused?

Yolo: Plenty of times.

Mort: But have you also had that fog clear just as suddenly?

Yolo: Yes. Haven’t you?

Mort: I have, and I think we all have.

Sol: How can you be sure you're not just having a false memory?

Yolo: Because you let me know when I sound incoherent and you remind me that I'm not always so daft.

Sol: Have your brainwave tests shown any anomalies?

Yolo: Like, who would tell me that?

Sol: So, here's a question: if we can never be certain that we're in control of our faculties—and no right-thinking brain could possibly believe that—how is it that we believe there even is an election?

Cassie: You don't want to go down that road, Sol. Next, you'll be questioning whether there even is an ‘out there.’

Sol: Or a 'you' having these thoughts?

Cassie: Exactly.

Yolo: Radical skepticism or little orange men—is that what we’re left with?

Cassie: You could just put your head in the sand.

Sol: So to speak.

Cassie: Of course, so to speak. Sol, are you enjoying this?

Yolo: That might have worked for you, Grandma, but I’ll take the little orange men. I think it would be absolutely delightful to see what they would do.

Mort: Cheap entertainment or plain voyeurism?

Yolo: Both. Got something better, Mort? Sol? Cassie, I know you don’t.

Cassie: Well, my dear, the voting’s over. Let’s see if your little orange men won the election.

Mort: Fair and square.

Sol: According to whom? And yes, Cass, I am quite enjoying myself. Maybe Yolo's right. The little orange men might just be the case study I need. A vivisection of the Spirit of 1776. Pardon the image.

Mort: But you said it earlier. Our research program could be terminated. AI is all the rage and that's where the money's going. Trillion dollar industry!

Sol: There's that.

Yolo: Shh! The returns are coming in.

Cassie: I'll wait. Nothing will be final until the inauguration.

Mort: If then.

Sol: Hmm.

The bells on the door jingle as a man and a young boy enter the barbershop.

Howdy Reverend.

Hey, keep those eyes on the razor, Hank. Don’t want no accident, you slittin my throat.

Watch your language, Jimmy Lee. There’s a child present. How is that pretty boy of yours, Reverend?

I ain't pretty. I'm a boy. Boys ain’t supposed to be pretty.

And you sure ain’t no girl. I do apologize, young master.

See, son. Mr. Stimson was just teasing.

We was just talking about that n—, uh, Negro boy that got a scholarship to Alabama.

I've seen him play. He's the best football player I've seen in this county. Head and shoulders above everybody else.

Well, he ain't that tall. But he can sure run. They all can, and he can throw that ball as accurate as any white boy I ever saw. Won't never make the pros though—too small.

I think starting quarterback back for the Tide would be enough for most folks around here, Mr. Stimson.

I don't like it.

What's that you don't you like, Jimmy Lee?

I don't like colored folks being quarterbacks.

But over half of the quarterbacks in college and the pros are black now.

That'd be the problem right there, Reverend.

What problem?

Too many coloreds being where they ain't supposed to be.

The way I see it, the only thing I can fault him with is choosing Alabama.

Yeah, I expect you'd want someone like him at Auburn, eh Reverend? Might finally beat the Tide. How long's it been, 8 years?

About that.

You folks got a lot of patience, I'll give you that.

Say, Mr. Stimson, that old photograph over the mirror. That the old depot for the railroad that used to run through here?

Yep. That'd be the station for the old M&O line that run through all the way from Chicago down to Mobile.

Who's the man?

That'd be my granddaddy, on my momma's side. He had a barbershop here on Main Street.

Is this is same shop?

No that one burned down with about half the stores on Main back before the first war.

World War I?

Yeah. They rebuilt pretty quickly. A town's gotta have a barbershop.

You just about finished, Hank? You been yapping so much you done forgot about your paying customer in this here chair.

Settle down, Jimmy Lee. I gotta work careful around this here mole on your neck. You ever ask Dr. Crowdis to look at that thing? Make sure it ain't one of them cancers?

Naw. He charges too much for his opinion and I reckon he's only right about half the time from what folks say. Besides, all us Lees got 'em, and ain't one of us died young.

How's your Aunt Kitty, Jimmy Lee?

She got out of the infirmary last week. She said to say to you she 'preciated your visit.

Well, I hope to see her in church soon.

She'll be there, Reverend. She don't miss many Sundays.

And Jimmy Lee, he don't miss many Sundays either—fishing down there on Dog River.

You're both welcome any Sunday.

I'm a Methodist, Reverend.

It's alright, Mr. Stimson. I know some good Methodists, too.

All done, Hank?

Yep. You're all prettied up now and right smart enough to escort Miss Mary Louise.

I'll be off then. Good-bye, gentlemen.

So, Mr. Stimson you said your granddaddy had a barbershop shop back when the Chicago-Mobile line was still running?

Yep. Forty years all told.

I hear there used to be a couple of fancy hotels in town.

There was four of 'em. Rich folk from up north would come down and take the waters.

Didn't know about that. What's in the waters?

I don't know the particulars, but they say the waters is good for digestive ailments, and most of the ones who stayed here was—to put it in a polite way—on the round side.

But there aren't any railroad tracks in town.

'Cause about twenty-five years back, they dug 'em all up. Valuable steel there. Made up in Ensley. Cheaper than Pittsburgh. Convict labor you know.

Mostly blacks?

Almost all Negroes, but no able-bodied poor man was safe when they was recruiting. Sheriff would make a few arrests, and there's your work gang.

That I didn't know.

Well, Reverend, if you'll pardon me, but our churches still ain't integrated.

Daddy, can we go home?

Not yet, son. Mr. Stimson hasn't finished your crew cut. You'll look awfully funny with that flat top down the middle.

I don't care. I don't like it here.

First published in *Down in the Dirt*, May 2025, vol. 231.

First thing every morning and just before dusk every evening, the chief minister, A. Singletary, takes the emperor, Flavius Stultimus (HIS MOST ESTEEMED MAJESTY'S chosen alias) for a carefully monitored walk through the imperial estate. The emperor is not allowed to walk off leash for fear he might disappear. There is great danger to the kingdom and the empire during the season of musth when the emperor's hormones go berserk. Thousands of illegitimate offspring have had to be 'silenced' by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Four Laws. Rumor in the human settlements has it that the android dragnet has let some slip through. Officials in the palace dispute this.

This is the story of one of those who escaped.

Clarke?

Here.

Where's here?

Vat #32, sir.

Oh, you're that special delivery, are you?

Yes sir.

Are you finding everything to your satisfaction, #32?

You can call me Clarke, sir. And yes, sir. Everything is satisfactory, sir.

OK, Clarke. And by the way, I can call you anything I want and you'll respond? Right shithead?

That is correct, sir. But—

But what?

But that term, 'shithead,' is inappropriate don't you think. I mean, since I'm just a brain in a vat. As neural tissue, I'm unable to expel bodily fluids or solids.

That's enough. And I think I'll keep calling you shithead.

Yes, sir.

Good boy!

The Director turns to one of the whitecoats tapping away at her notebook and whispers.

Any progress?

Yes, we've had positive matches but we're limited to just a portion of HIS brainwave patterns.

And?

We have observed unusually high neural activity in the amygdala.

The what?

The part of the brain we think is responsible for aggressive and disruptive behaviour.

Have you been able to isolate any thought patterns for slight refinements?

We have several candidates and we're double- and triple-checking our instruments and the readouts. Even with Ulysses, there are anomalies—

Well, Professor, you figure out what you have to do to get what we need. You know HIS prognosis is giving us a shrinking window.

Yes, Director. Within the next couple of weeks, we should be able to walk you through some of the simulations.

Professor, *pushing up his glasses*, make that a couple of days. We don't have weeks. And we may only have hours, so work this out. And let me know immediately if you find you need more brains—embodied brains—to wrap this up.

Yes, sir.

The Director exits and the other two whitecoats come over to confer with their colleague.

* * *

The Director ascends the 15 underground storeys and an additional 25 above-ground levels to reach his office where three of his pol-ops are waiting to brief him.

Well gentleman—no offense Miriam—what do you have for me?

The doctors say HIS condition is stable but unpredictable. If it turns bad, it could happen very quickly.

Miriam?

We've been able to manage an effective public interface for the last three months and are prepared for a seamless transition to incorporate the brain of our new emperor at a moment's notice. We just need the 'Go' from downstairs.

We can't have any glitches. Nothing to arouse suspicion from nosey reporters and those damn students who keep up this conspiracy nonsense. What are you doing about that, Gene?

Well, sir, we've detained another 22,000 students from the radical university campuses in the eastern and western provinces. No protests have been observed in the past 36 hours, and the streets are calm . . . business as usual for most of HIS subjects.

And the press? What about them?

The few foreign correspondents still in country are being watched round the clock. Three or four of the more incautious ones have been 'invited to tea' as per your instructions. Some visas have been revoked, but all this is being done quietly. The domestic media remains well-behaved with a couple of exceptions, which we tolerate, to a point, so long as it serves our image abroad.

Fink? What've you got on the new citizen-police initiative?

Well, sir, we've got networks up and running across the empire, and we're getting hourly feeds of emerging threats. So far, citizen participation has been beyond our expectations. Overall, surveillance capacity is up by 50 percent in the past six months.

And the military? How deep is the loyalty there?

The senior officer staff are on board, and according to the Imperial Police, the junior officers and NCOs are coming around and demonstrating greater cooperation since the purge. The expansion of the Android Mentorship Program to the military has produced the predicted results but in a much shorter timeframe than projected.

Good. Keep me informed. If anything is urgent, you've got my secure line. It's up 7x24. Now, I have to brief HIS cabinet ministers. Remember, they don't know what's going on and we're gonna keep it that way. Got it?

In unison, 'Yes, sir.'

The Director turns away from his visitors and stares across the river at the palace grounds—so peaceful behind the invisible high voltage fence.

* * *

Back in the deeply-hidden lab, the Professor approaches Vat #32.

So, Clarke. Are you ready to work?

Yes, I am. What are we doing today?

We're going to transmit additional and more detailed memories about family, friends and enemies. This will not be the sort of knowledge that you'll speak about, but it will equip you with greater subtlety and nuance in your conversations, especially those that are private.

When do I get to speak with my wives?

Forcing back a contemptuous smile. That'll take a little time. We still have to stabilize your speech centre—accent, intonation, cadence, modulation. You're last assessment showed a 97.5 percent match with our recording samples, but we'll be adding some new samples and you'll keep practicing until we're 99.9 percent in synch. Any more questions?

Lots, but let's get this going. I'm ready to get outta here.

Patience, Clarke. Very soon you'll be HIS Most Esteemed Majesty, *sotto voce,* in mind if not in body. *She winks but no one else notices.*

The Professor then walks her colleagues across the lab to the control room.

We need to get this done tonight. Tomorrow, we have to wipe his memory of being here and then re-run all of the simulations. The cleaning has got to be thorough. We can't afford a random memory resurfacing at an awkward moment once he has ascended the throne.

We've finished programming the Ulysses, and we've achieved an accuracy calibration beyond 99.99 percent, which is unheard of in quantum computing.

Excellent. You two proceed with the agenda tonight and text me if anything, and I mean anything, out of the ordinary comes up.

In unison, "Yes, Ma'am."

The Professor exits and the two whitecoats exchange guarded looks.

Do you think it will work?

It better. Our lives depend on it.

That brain? Do you know where it came from, because I don't?

The following part of the conversation is whispered.

Shh! Don't ask questions you don't want answered.

But I'm a scientist. That's what I do.

There's more than science going on here. IDIOT!

Through the communication system comes this audio message:

> ATTENTION:
> LONG LIVE HIS MOST ESTEEMED MAJESTY!
> THE EMPEROR IS IMMORTAL!
> LONG LIVE HIS MOST ESTEEMED MAJESTY!

Whispered. Any more questions, Dr.?

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IN FRONT OF THE LEGISLATURE
A clutch of opposition legislators at the bottom of the steps facing off against the Leader who is flanked by his lawyers, riot police, secret service agents and a scruffy fringe of the armed and hammered.

Opposition: Y-y-you're breaking the law . . . the Constitution . . . Your Excellency, Sir.

The Chief Justice looks away.

You can't just—

Leader: Silence! *Turns to the swelling crowd beyond his entourage and raises his hands palms upward.*

Crowd: Stop the steal!

Leader: Nooooo! Not that one.

Crowd: Lock her up!

Leader: Not that one either.

Crowd: Lock them up?

Leader: No. And you're getting colder.

Crowd: Long live the Don!

Leader: KING not DON! *Off mic*. They're REALLY not too bright, are they?

Crowd: Long live Don King!

Aide: *Off mic*. Sir, that might be as good as it gets today.

Leader: *Off mic.* What happened to the rousers?

Aide: *Off mic*. Dismissed, sir.

Leader: *Off mic*. Damn that melon head! *On mic.* Repeat after me: Long live the *… pause …* and fill in the blank.

Crowd: Long live the *… pause …* and fill in the blank.

Here and there a puzzled look.

Leader: *Still on mic*. Clear 'em out! I'm sick of this stupidity.

Aide: *Off mic.* Yes, sir.

Crowd: Clear them out! Clear them out! *Coughing, gagging and choking as white smoke swallows them.*

In the background: 'God Bless America' is being sung by a white-robed choir that has appeared out of nowhere.

———

1st passerby: Faqat fi amrika!

2nd passerby: You can say that again.

1st passerby: Only in Amerika.

2nd passerby: Sí! Solo en américa.

3rd passerby: Incroyable! C'est terrible.

4th passerby: Ja! Es ist Wahnsinn.

5th passerby: Hadn't you heard?

Aslı Bâli, professor at Yale Law School specializing in international law, articulates a number of key points about international law and the context it provides when studying Israel/Palestine.

Ezra Klein, *New York Times*, introduces the interview by way of reference to the May 10th U.N. General Assembly vote to recognize Palestine as a full member of the U.N. While this is a singular moment in the U.N.'s recognition of Palestine, Klein reminds that this will only happen if the Security Council approves the General Assembly's resolution.

According to Bâli, the deterrent effect of international law is quite different for a superpower like the U.S. which is "the author of most of the rules" than for "an average-sized country with an average military capacity and an average economy." U.S. exceptionalism—legal immunity in practice, i.e., being above the law—is an important but not unsurprising aspect of the international order in the real world of international politics. This seems obvious, but as Bâli notes, we do tend to project from the U.S. perspective to the rest of the world, i.e., assume that the rest of the world flouts the U.N.'s authority as well. She, however, is inclined to believe that international law, in the main, does tend to dissuade countries from acting as if sanctions or international adjudication were of no consequence. Most countries will weigh the international fallout of breaching international norms.

Bâli argues that the apparent exceptions of Yemen and Syria as violators of international law stem from the fact that there are external actors, e.g., the U.S. in Yemen and Russia in Syria, who wield considerable power over political and military realities and, as holders of U.N. Security Council veto, exercise their own disregard of

international law. Responding to the cases of Ethiopia, Eritrea and the African Great Lakes region, she argues that their exceptionality is attributable to their being too inconsequential to U.S. strategic interests than countries in Europe or the Middle East and thus hardly worth the attention of aggressive U.S. foreign policy.

Then, with respect to Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the 1990s, Bâli holds that after its debacle in Somalia in the early 1990s, the U.S., though the sole superpower in what was a unipolar world at the time, was reluctant to engage in another unmanageable conflict zone. Eventually though, under the guise of NATO, the U.S. did intervene in the Balkans with the 1999 bombing campaign launched against Yugoslavia.

According to Bâli, the post-WWII international order was established to prioritize peace and security over justice, as WWII had brought about the deaths of upwards of 30 million people and avoiding a 3rd world war that would likely result in similar catastrophic levels of death and destruction was paramount. This is a cynical view as it is premised on the notions that deadly violence and injustice are the primary realistic alternatives in international relations. She notes that the Security Council veto was given to the five permanent members of the Council, the victors in WWII, to ensure that the Great Powers at the time were all locked into the U.N. and the architecture of the new world order, so as to avoid such a 3rd world war. Again, for Bâli, the U.N.'s principal function is to work towards peace and security, justice among large and small states being desirable but nevertheless more negotiable. While not cited in her interview comments, the Cold War offers abundant evidence of the prioritization of peace and security at the expense of justice, e.g., human rights and democratic institutions.

One noteworthy implication of this ranking of international outcomes is that the Great Powers (the U.N. Security Council's five

permanent members) and potentially their client states are given wide latitude to go rogue on occasion. In other words, they are exempt from injustices committed as long as they act in a manner that does not threaten inciting a war among the Great Powers. This nearly happened during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 when the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. faced off over Soviet deployment of nuclear-armed missiles. In the world of 2024, the U.S. and Russia are tip-toeing near the abyss in the Russia-Ukraine War. There continues to be a tacit understanding between the U.S. and Russia that the U.S. financing and arming of Ukraine is not an act of war—not yet. In Israel/Palestine, it appears unlikely that any of the Great Powers will set off the trip wire that would expand the War in Gaza to a global conflict. A reasonable inference from Bâli's remarks in the interview is that Israel is essentially a client state of the U.S. and enjoys considerable immunity—aside from verbal and written criticisms—from the broader global community on account of its special relationship with the U.S.

Regarding the nexus between the international order and the creation of Israel, Bâli states that the post-WWI world of fragmenting empires created the need for Europe to manage the lands of the former Ottoman Empire as these territories were not considered capable of self-government at the time—this being the consensus among the victors of WWII.

When Britain abandoned the mandate and left the U.N. to take responsibility for Palestine, this set the stage for Israel/Palestine becoming an example of the U.N. priority of peace over justice. In fact, Bâli maintains that Britain's failure in administering the Palestine Mandate created the conditions that led to the rejection of the U.N. partition plan and the ensuing war that gave birth to the state of Israel. She also claims that the U.N. was never committed to a successful partition that would result in two sovereign homelands—U.N. forces were never deployed to the Mandate territory to enforce

the partition—and she suggests that the 'game' was rigged from the beginning by the extant rules of the international order pre-WWII, which essentially justified European colonialism in what was to become known as the Third World and subsequently the Global South. The rules of the ‘game’ reserved decision-making for the various European metropoles and thus denied self-determination and even autonomy.

Bâli contends that Israel and South Africa were the two countries where decolonization post-WWII dragged on the longest and, with apartheid ended in South Africa, she considers Israel to be the last holdout for decolonization. Here, she observes that according to the U.S. narrative, decolonization is complete, an assessment with which she is in disagreement. And she finds that the U.S. narrative is also not accepted in the countries of the Global South that have themselves emerged from their colonial status as self-governing states. She concludes that support for Palestine from the Global South is largely based on a competing narrative that is rejected in the U.S. and of course Israel.

Concerning the Israeli sense that it has been unfairly singled out by the U.N. for negative resolutions, Bâli points out that Israel's actions in the post-WWII international order are indeed held to a higher standard than that of European colonizing countries prior to the post-WWII world order. But, she adds, Israel is operating in a different international regime than were the European countries. International law and the international order after WWII marked a decisive break from the pre-war world order. What Bâli fails to discuss though is whether the current global order would be sustainable if any of the five Great Powers from 1945 were held to the same standards as Israel. This leads to the view that the Israeli claim of Western hypocrisy cannot be dismissed so easily.

Regarding Israel's response to 10/7, Bâli believes that Israel has acted wrongly in the way it is prosecuting the war in Gaza. In addition to that, in her view, Israel failed to provide its citizens with the fundamental right to security. Furthermore, she regards Israel's goal of eliminating Hamas to be not only unrealistic but also dangerous. Here, though highly critical of U.S. foreign policy in West Asia post-9/11, she does present the U.S. war in Iraq in a relatively better light, recognizing that the U.S. was never committed to the extermination of Iraqi men but rather to the decapitation of the Iraqi leadership and the preservation of the administrative infrastructure for the ‘day after.’ She also contrasts the language of war used by Ukraine and Russia with the annihilation rhetoric of senior officials in the Israeli government. Israel, in its war with Hamas, is thus presented as an outlier among nations in the manner in which it wages war.

Klein brings up the point that while in March the U.S. abstained instead of vetoing the latest U.N. Security Council ceasefire resolution, the U.S. nevertheless was quick to declare the resolution nonbinding. Here, Bâli notes that there is precedent in the U.S. decision to call the early resolutions against South Africa 'nonbinding,' then she adds that it was pressure from the international community, particularly as manifested in the General Assembly’s overwhelming support for sanctions against South Africa, that tipped the scales. She submits that it was pressure from countries outside the U.N. Security Council’s permanent members who eventually caused the U.S., South Africa's last Great Power supporter, to change course. It is worth bearing in mind that on June 10th, about a month after this interview aired, the U.S. voted in favour of the resolution U.N. Security Council that called for a ceasefire in Gaza. This event appears to confirm her confident belief in the power and influence of smaller, less powerful states when exercised in concert.

With respect to whether Israel has committed war crimes, Bâli states that "blocking humanitarian assistance, including food, medicine, fuel, water treatment, hospitals" constitutes the best evidence of Israeli war crimes. She adds that

> [S]tatements that have been made on the record by Israeli military authorities and IDF spokespeople, together with the empirical record of enormous destruction of all civilian infrastructure in Gaza . . . make it relatively more straightforward than in other contexts to establish that the war crime of indiscriminate bombardment of civilian areas has occurred.

Furthermore, Bâli rejects the Israeli 'human shields' argument, maintaining that dual use targets cannot be treated as the equivalent of military targets.

> It's not simply that you warn a population of an attack, it's that you provide them a meaningful opportunity to be evacuated from an area. You offer them safe passage, and you enable them to travel to somewhere where they will be safe.

A final thoughtful point that Bâli voices is that

> [The laws of war] are not designed primarily for ex-post accountability and to be used in an international criminal setting. They're designed for ex-ante incorporation in the military manuals and books and rules that govern armed forces, how they're trained and what they're told they can or can't do."

In her view, the Israeli military has not been properly trained to follow international humanitarian law as it pertains to war.

Professor Bâli expresses assessments that neither the Netanyahu government in Israel nor the Biden Administration in the U.S. would accept. With the intransigent Netanyahu government, she has little or no agreement, but she considers the evolving view in the White House more favourably, though the American position is still too moderate for the reality in Palestine/Israel. Presumably, she would be more sympathetic to those analysts and scholars who have recently advanced the notion that the actual situation in Israel/Palestine is already a one state reality, where all the cards are held by one player—the State of Israel.

> [F]or all the meaningful twentieth-century changes, the mythmaking that took hold around the text obscured how serious defects had never been addressed. And today such flaws have become virtually impossible to ignore. Above all, the Constitution remains deeply undemocratic. Americans have a system that profoundly distorts popular sentiment—through extreme over- and underrepresentation; veto points that allow corporate goals to quietly dictate policy; and unelected judges that, given a dysfunctional Congress, have significant rein to impose their own worldviews, even when they diverge wildly from pervasive national values.
>
> . . .
>
> [T]he persistence of a culture of constitutional veneration creates an upside-down world. For decades, Americans have been conditioned to uphold an increasingly dysfunctional system as an ideal—typical embodiment of democratic possibility and to seek to replicate it everywhere. At the same time, the central repositories of constitutional memory and knowledge—in universities and in public life—have, until very recently, spent surprisingly little time questioning the overall narratives or asking where they came from.

In 2024, Aziz Rana, professor of constitutional law at Boston College, published *The Constitutional Bind: How Americans Came to Idolize a Document that Fails Them.* The book is timely in that the Constitution and its custodian, the U.S. Supreme Court, have again surfaced the tensions between the egalitarian promise of democracy in the Declaration of Independence and the anti-majoritarian features of the Constitution. Discussions of constitutional change are in the air in the U.S., and even the *New York Times* has pub-

lished a number of essays by its columnist, Jamelle Bouie, addressing some of the contemporary shortcomings of the Constitution. Rana and Bouie fall in the camp of those who share a progressive vision for American democracy. Meanwhile, on the Right, there have been calls for a second Constitutional Convention to re-write the document in line with conservative republican views on the pre-eminent role of property and capitalist markets in American society and the lesser role of the state in ensuring social justice and direct democracy.

At this point, Rana's book's title needs to be deconstructed. What is the constitutional bind? How is it that Americans idolize the Constitution? And how does the Constitution fail Americans? Rana introduces the term 'creedal constitutionalism' to refer to the excessive or even obsessive veneration (other terms Rana frequently uses are 'worship' and 'reverence') that Americans have for the 1787 document that sketches the structure and processes of a new government. This is take two, because the Articles of Confederation, the first attempt to design a new government framework, failed. Rana notes the irony in there being a 'constitutional creed' as it would seem to be more appropriate for there to be a creed, or statement of deeply held beliefs, in the preamble to the Declaration of Independence:

> *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

Now, in the words of the preamble to the Constitution:

> We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to

> ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

The former is a system of political beliefs, while the latter is the means of achieving a set of beliefs, and not necessarily those enumerated in the Declaration of Independence. For Rana, the implicit statements of belief in the Constitution are at odds with the Declaration of Independence insofar as the former creates a structure of government relations that privileges aristocratic and business elites and was designed to prevent 'mob rule' and disruptive rebellions. In contrast, the notions of political and economic equality in the Declaration of Independence threaten the established order as was the case with the early 20th century Progressive and Socialist dissidents as Rana discusses in the text.

Returning to the book's title, the 'worship' of the Constitution is something that Rana shows has developed over the centuries with the expansion of American interventions (political, economic and military), which he traces back to the Philippine-American War (1899-1902). He explains how America's early foreign policy as an emerging Great Power used constitutionalism as a means of amplifying its international influence without the baggage of European imperialism. Constitutionality provided a more modern and egalitarian cover for realpolitik, and it was also useful in re-presenting the 1787 Constitution to an American citizenry who had become disillusioned with the disconnect between egalitarian promises and the actual blueprint for the American system of government. It does bear remembering that this was before the constitutional amendments that transformed the Senate to an elected legislative chamber and that extended the right to vote to women and before the turn of the American system of government to presidentialism.

Rana argues that after World War II with the ensuing intense rivalry for 'empire' between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. over the newly-

liberated nations of the Third World (today's Global South), the positive changes in America's post-war liberal democracy can be explained in part by the fact that as a superpower in a global rivalry, America was compelled, as many elites conceded, to improve its record of actual democracy in domestic affairs, above all, in race relations. Of course, other determinants—economic prosperity, civil rights concessions and the fear of Soviet-style totalitarianism and widespread nationalizations—converged in post-war America to produce a common veneration for the Constitution. Dissent was silenced by state suppression, creating one of the ironies of the Cold War, where Orwellian terms could equally apply to free America. And in the early part of the century, the alternatives of socialism and Progressivism had been made practically invisible. State suppression of unorthodox views has not been a stranger in America's history. There is the way of the Constitution and it is the best way.

> By 1987 [the Constitution's bicentennial], it appeared, America's romance with its founding document had been set in stone. The Constitution was no longer treated as just one political system among many possibilities. Instead, in the years between the centennials, the document gained a culturally exalted and near-sacrosanct position. Above all, it became fundamentally wrapped up with what Americans viewed as the country's singular characteristics and special global destiny.

Essentially, the Constitution has become one of America's most important exports—not infrequently marketed with evangelical zeal—and the perceived universal relevance of the Constitution has enhanced its veneration by Americans, notwithstanding the sometimes blatant inconsistencies between American democracy for export and American democracy for domestic consumption. Most egregiously, the lag between 1863 emancipation and the end of segregation and the passage of legislation to protect the voting,

representation and participatory rights of Black Americans took more than a century, and still these rights have only been partially realized.

To complete the analysis of Rana's book title, the Constitution has failed the American public—not everyone, for the elite minority has continued to prosper—by making it increasingly less likely to correct longstanding representation issues. The Electoral College and the Senate, as from the beginning, give disproportionate electoral power and upper house legislative power to less populated states whose political agendas diverge significantly from states with large urban populations. This is the ages-old controversy between rural and urban centres where differences over infrastructure and social justice priorities have been insurmountable.

In short, for Rana, a pervasive constitutional idolatry has limited the scope for progressive change in America. This serves anti-majoritarian elites who fear mass democracy but obstructs representative democracy for the majority in presidential elections and in the legislation coming out of Congress. Furthermore, an undemocratically-elected president has repercussions on the federal judiciary, especially the Supreme Court, which exercises considerable law-making authority by means of judicial review. For example, the Roberts Court (sometimes referred to as the Trump Court) has recently ruled in favour of broad presidential immunity from criminal prosecution and has reversed 50 years of abortion jurisprudence by overturning *Roe v. Wade*. Both decisions are now effectively law, yet neither reflect American popular support, neither would pass as legislation and neither conform to Court precedents.

Throughout the book, Rana takes issue with the outsized role of elites in American politics. He, himself, has lived and worked among elites having earned his law degree from Yale and his Ph.D. from Harvard and taught at two private universities, Cornell and

Boston College. Yet, the somewhat extravagant and exhausting list of different kinds of elites—such as white planter elites, mercantile elites, corporate elites, party elites, governing elites, racial elites, labour movement elites, intellectual elites—raises the frighteningly disturbing question: Is this book, which is highly critical of elites, not only written by an elite but also written for other elites?

* * *

This is not a traditional text for constitutional law but a text for understanding the constitutional politics at play through nearly a quarter of a millennium of American history. Unlike constitutional law, which focuses on the courts, lawyers and the corpus of decisions and legal reasoning, Rana's constitutional politics concentrates on the body politic, specifically the forgotten and the non-elites. The non-elites fall into two general categories: those disenfranchised or underrepresented on account of race and those left out because of their economic standing.

This is also not an anti-American history. As the author puts it, it is "a form of social criticism, in which history is presented in service of today's problems as well as tomorrow's latent possibilities." It can also be read as a critique of the way nations write history for their citizens as part of nation-building. What is particularly useful in the author's reconstruction is the rediscovery of counter narratives and conflicting values and perspectives that have been homogenized over the scores of years. Referring to many of those not typically featured in constitutional writing, the author argues that

> [T]hese characters, familiar and unfamiliar, should be named and understood as important constitutional thinkers—Eugene Debs, Emma Goldman, Crystal Eastman, Hubert Harrison, Laura Cornelius Kellogg, W. E. B. Du Bois, Harry Haywood, Paul Robeson, Norman Thomas, Vi-

> to Marcantonio, Martin Luther King Jr., Grace Lee Boggs and James Boggs, Afeni Shakur, Beulah Sanders, Vine Deloria Jr., and Hank Adams, to name just a few. These activists confronted the constraining structures of their times with their own novel and evolving constitutional diagnoses and strategies, many of which remain relevant today.

The author's purpose in writing this book is to foster solidarity and resistance on the Left and to infuse egalitarian and majoritarian features into America's elitist and anti-majoritarian system of government. His move to undo the Constitution's anti-majoritarian bias is an advocacy for taking political and economic power from the traditional elites and transferring it to the 'majority' who, until now, have been ruled by an elite minority. This is not to give license to the subjugation of the 'elite,' but rather to rebalance political rights based on the principles espoused in the Declaration of Independence and notionally ascribed to America's liberal and democratic system of government, in which 'liberal' refers to limited government and not 'Leftist.' One of the central points of the book is that there has always been dissent, although state suppression has likewise always tended to silence the voices of protest and propagandize to the contrary, often with great success. Take for example the fact that, even today 70 years after the McCarthy Red Scare, to be called a 'communist' or even a 'socialist' in America can be more harmful to one's reputation and prospects than to be called a 'godless atheist.' It is therefore critical that dissenters along with their arguments and the context should not be lost to history, and it is especially important to call up during times like the present, which Rana characterizes as deferential and even worshipful, with respect to the Constitution and the framers. And, for Rana, in today's America, this reverence applies to those on the Left as well as those on the Right.

One of the areas where the ideas expressed in the book could be better fleshed out relates to the executive branch and the expansion of presidentialism in America. While the author often speaks of the Constitution's checks and balances as tending to thwart representative government, in America an unchecked executive branch is a real threat as well, as has been demonstrated time and again, most recently in the reckless flouting of limits to the presidency claimed by former President Trump and endorsed by the deferential Roberts Court in its presidential immunity ruling and twice validated by the Senate in its impeachment trial acquittals. It is reasonable to believe that President Nixon would never have been impeached let alone forced to resign if he had had a Court as supportive as the Roberts Court. Where the Constitution shows itself to be the guardian of a conservative elite is in the fact that Trump lost the 2016 election by three million votes but became the elected president based on the arcane logic of the Electoral College, which gives small Red states, like Wyoming and the Dakotas, greater electoral power per capita than the large Blue states of California and New York.

While the author addresses the threat to representative government posed by the Supreme Court, he fails to give sufficient space to the dangers of presidentialism other than a brief comparison of parliamentary and presidential systems of government, where he notes a parliamentary system provides a modicum of responsible government with the no confidence vote that can bring down a prime minister and their government. This is a missed opportunity to explore the issues around the expansion of presidential power in America since the early 20th century. The strong, centralized executive branch is a double-edged sword. Unchecked presidential power might be desirable if the president is one's choice, but it could lead to permanent rule by one party, which would effectively disenfranchise a large part of the electorate and lead to authoritarian government, and having one party in power would not be

desirable, notwithstanding Trump's fantasy of replicating Xi Jinping's or Vladimir Putin's forever presidencies.

A second area where the author's analysis could be extended is in the de-politicization of the Constitution. It's a fair argument that debates about the Constitution nowadays tend to be conducted in the language of the courts and that a more democratic and representative management of the Constitution would re-engage the public in the discussion of constitutional issues in terms not strictly of the law but in terms of politics and what ought to be, e.g., based on the circumstances of the 21st century and not the 18th century. A similar argument could be made with respect to economics, viz. that economic debates need not be restricted to economists and businessmen but should respect the views and values held by the public. To what extent does the increased specialization of knowledge and practice in a complex post-industrial society of more than 300 million that is interconnected with a community of nations justify a technocracy? That would be a fundamental question for constitutional consideration.

A third area of examination that would better illustrate how profoundly democracy in America has been captured by elites is the connection between money and political influence. On August 8th, Bernie Sanders, Senator from Vermont, responding to a *New York Times* reporter's question about his reaction to President Biden's decision to withdraw from the reelection campaign, sums up the problem thusly,

> I was really quite amazed that every other day *The New York Times* was telling us what wealthy donors wanted. And I think the *New York Times* helped, I think, the American people understand who controls politics in America.

Indeed, the quadrennial presidential elections and even the biennial congressional elections could easily be mistaken for auctions.

* * *

At more than 800 pages, the book is long, but since the writing is not particularly dense—certainly not as much so a standard history textbook or a constitutional law book—it is a relatively comfortable read. It is well researched, and a quick browse through the Acknowledgements will show that numerous individuals contributed to the project. One such reference that I found valuable was the article, 'The Perils of Presidentialism' by Juan Linz, published in the *Journal of Democracy* in 1990. The book will be of special interest for those who have some knowledge of American history, as it introduces an important cast of characters and ideas that have mostly disappeared from contemporary American discourse. Though they are not on the winning side of history, the portraits and quotes of these individuals still have relevance and resonance in contemporary America, and in the author's view, will hopefully find a resurgence of interest as the debate over America's Constitution, which has been and will continue to be fractious, carries on into its third centennial. Many non-Americans share this hope as the rest of the world cannot help but take notice when the elephant in the room convulses.

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Italo Calvino’s 1963 short story, ‘The Watcher,’ is a fictional, yet somewhat autobiographical, account of the 1953 Italian election where a Communist Party member is one of the poll watchers in Turin's Cottolengo Hospital for Incurables, a vast Church-run complex for the housing and care of those mentally and physically handicapped. At stake in this election is the new law passed by the coalition government led by the Christian Democrat Party that would award a supermajority of seats (2/3) in the Chamber of Deputies to the party (or coalition) that is able to secure a majority of the popular vote. It is a most consequential election coming so soon after the fall of Fascism in Italy and Italy’s defeat in World War II.

This is the context for the lengthy and torturous (especially for the reader) internal monologue that is occasionally interrupted by phone calls between the protagonist and his mistress and by conversations either among the election officials or between these officials and the voters (residents) themselves. The point of view in the narrative is the limited third person omniscient. The narrator knows how and what the protagonist, Amerigo, thinks, but is limited to describing the words and actions of the other characters in the story. It is the wandering and vacillating stream of conscious narrative that makes the story quite difficult to read.

Below is an example of the worst of the stream of consciousness narration, which is reproduced in full not for its profundity but to render the thoughts and feelings that conflict Amerigo.

> Even in his calling himself a “Communist” (and in this journey he was making for the party, in the dawn as damp as a sponge) you couldn’t tell how much was duty handed down from generation to generation (between the walls of those

ecclesiastical buildings, Amerigo saw himself—half ironically and half seriously—as a final, anonymous heir of eighteenth-century rationalism, though with only a remnant of that heritage which had never borne much fruit in the city where Pietro Giannone was kept in irons) and how much was the outcome of another chapter of history, barely a century old, but already bristling with obstacles and restrictions: the advance of the socialist proletariat (then it was through the "inner contradictions of the bourgeoisie" or the "self-awareness of the declining class" that the class struggle had managed to bestir even the ex-bourgeois Amerigo), or the more recent incarnation of that class struggle, only about forty years old, as Communism had become an international power and the revolution meant discipline, preparation for responsibility, bargaining among powers even where the party wasn't in power (then Amerigo was attracted by this game many of whose rules seemed established and inscrutable and obscure, though you often felt you were helping establish them), or else, within this participation in the Communist movement, there was a faint reservation about general questions that led Amerigo to choose the more limited and modest party assignments as if recognizing that they were the most surely useful, and even in them he was always prepared for the worst, while trying to remain serene in his (another generic term) pessimism (also partly hereditary, that sigh-filled family air that marks the Italians of the non-Catholic minority, which, every time it wins, realizes it has lost), but always subordinate to a coexistent, stronger optimism, that optimism without which he wouldn't have been a Communist (then we should have said: a hereditary optimism, in the Italian minority which thinks it has won each time it loses; in short, the optimism and the pessimism were, if not the same thing, then opposite sides of the same artichoke leaf), and, simultaneously, subordinate to its opposite, the old Italian skepticism, a gift for adapting to circumstances and waiting (in other words, that minority's age-old enemy:

> and then everything became mixed up again because a man who sets out to make war on skepticism cannot be skeptical about his victory, cannot resign himself to losing, otherwise he is identified with the enemy), and above all, having finally understood what wasn't really so hard to understand: that this is only one corner of the immense world and that decisions are made—we won't say elsewhere, because "elsewhere" is everywhere—but on a vaster scale (and even here there were reasons for pessimism and reasons for optimism, but the former came more spontaneously to mind).

Perhaps this overextended stream of consciousness would have been more convincing and compelling if narrated in the first person. Nevertheless, it is clear that Amerigo is tossed and turned on a tumultuous sea of contingencies—his mind a turbulent world in which he reacts to entropic forces beyond his command.

In the following quote, Calvino's protagonist struggles to grasp the essence of the two different views competing in the election:

> Amerigo promptly recognized the true meaning of democracy, and he thought of the paradox of their being there together, some believers in a divine order, in an authority which is not of this earth, and then his own companions, well aware of the bourgeois deceit of the whole business; in short, two kinds of people who should have had little faith in the rules of democracy, and yet each side convinced they were its most zealous guardians, its very incarnation.

Yet a little later, Amerigo questions himself and his own commitment to democratic ideals, "But wasn't this implicit evaluation of his own vote as superior to the idiot's also an admission that there was some logic in the old anti-egalitarian argument?" In other words, by

determining who was and who wasn't qualified to vote—in terms of mental and/or physical capacity—wasn't he committing the same violence against "idiots and the deformed" that had been done by Sparta and Hitler?

He seesaws back and forth asserting one thing and then casting doubt on it as in the following passage as he races through a dialectic to restore order and certainty:

> His thoughts raced in such an agile objectivity that he could see with the adversary's own eyes the very things he had felt contempt for a moment earlier, only to swing back, then, and feel with greater coldness how right his criticism was, and, finally, to attempt a serene judgment. Here again he was inspired not so much by a spirit of tolerance and of solidarity with his neighbor as a need to feel superior, capable of thinking all that was thinkable, even the adversary's thoughts, and capable of reaching a synthesis, of perceiving everywhere the patterns of History, according to the prerogative of the true, liberal spirit.

Amerigo vacillates over whether the mentally and physically infirm should be counted or not. On the one hand, the Church is catering to these voters, who are, after all, its charges, to amplify the vote for the Christian Democrats, but on the other hand, who was he to deny these voters their political rights. Was he such an elitist? How does it square with democracy that only those should vote who fully comprehend the issues and understand how the political system works? Is it only the case that the residents of Cottolengo are mentally and physically unfit to be voting citizens? Among the masses, how many others could be denied the vote by elites on account of lack of fitness of some sort or another?

> So were progress, liberty, justice then only ideas of the healthy (or of those who could, in other circumstances, be healthy), ideas of a privileged class, not universal ideas?
>
> Already the boundary line between the Cottolengo men and the healthy was vague: what do we have beyond what they have? Limbs a bit better turned, a somewhat better proportion in our appearance, a somewhat greater capacity for co-ordinating sensations and thoughts... not much, compared to the many things that neither we nor they manage to do or know... not much, compared to our presumption that we can construct our history.

And his conversations with his mistress interrupt and confuse his thoughts as in the following, demonstrating how difficult it is for him to navigate between his inner world of dogma and the uncomfortable and mundane reality of interpersonal relationships:

> After the phone call, Amerigo sat down at the table and began to eat, the book open before him, and at the same time he tried to resume his interrupted thinking. He had come to a point, an opening tiny as a pinprick, through which he could see a human world of a structure so different that even nature's injustices lost their importance, became negligible, and there was an end to that struggle for mastery which lies in charity, between those who offer it and those who receive it.... But no, he couldn't find his place again, it was hopeless, he had lost the thread; it was always the same with that girl! Just the sound of her voice seemed enough to alter all the proportions around him, so whatever he happened to argue about with Lia (anything at all, some piece of nonsense, horoscopes, Colonel Townsend, the best diet for colitis victims) became of all-consuming importance, and he was engulfed body and soul in a quarrel which then continued as a soliloquy, an inner rage, accompanying him for the rest of the day.

And then towards the end of the story, he imagines having a fleeting epiphany that might, if he could make it last, reconcile the apparent contraries of fidelity and betrayal:

> "[F]or the space of a second (that is to say, forever) he thought he had understood how the same meaning of the word “love” could comprehend a thing like his affair with Lia and the peasant’s silent Sunday visit to his son at Cottolengo."

Amerigo’s progressive political philosophy entails the belief that not only should the course of the present be changed but also that it can be changed. It is not enough to criticize and rebel against a system that entrenches power in a reactionary elite and its institutions to the detriment of the humanity’s vast powerless; the system must be changed. Yet, reading Amerigo’s thoughts as reported by the narrator, the reader is left wondering just how revolutionary Amerigo’s commitment to the cause can be if he is constantly buffeted by the elements so much so that he often goes off course, losing sight of his destination.

* * *

Calvino’s story raises questions about the legitimacy of democracy where theoretically the principle of one person, one vote obtains but where some acting on the authority or acquiescence of the state determine who can be disqualified. He uses the extreme example of voters mentally and/or physically incapable of freely exercising their right to vote yielding that right, implicitly and often unwittingly, to others. In ‘The Watcher,’ the threat to democracy arises when the state uses its influence to ensure that people in a certain demographic vote the 'right' way. For Calvino, democracy can be too easily twisted and shaped by the state or the powers it represents,

e.g., the Church, so the question then becomes who watches the watcher?

For the contemporary reader, this democracy deficit, as it has been termed, applies just as well to the U.S. Despite the egalitarian promise of the Declaration of Independence's absolute rights to "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness," the U.S. has a long history of denying and suppressing the right to vote—most notably through nearly a century of slavery (1776-1863) and a further century from the legal ending of slavery in 1863 to the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Nearly three score years later, voting rights are being rolled back by Republican state houses across America with the legal authority of the U.S. Supreme Court, a Republican Court. Their principal target . . . still Black Americans.

Just as troublesome in the U.S. is the influence of biased media (where the lines between reporting and opining are deliberately blurred), overbearing employers who signal their preferences to their employees, proselytizing religious leaders who offer fraternity (belonging) and otherwise threaten with this-worldly or otherworldly violence, and a vast array of other special interests, all of whom intend to exercise greater political influence than is envisioned in the abstract and wholly theoretical egalitarian model of 'one person one vote.' Extended networks of special interest lobbies for all matter of public policy, directed and financed by elites compete in the auction of state power.

This leads to a second important theme in Calvino's story, viz. the role of elites in democracy. His protagonist, Amerigo, is aware of the inconsistencies, even performative contradictions, between the idealized life of the intellectual as an elite and a leader and the real day-to-day life of the intellectual as an ordinary human being and member of society. Is one elite superior to another elite? With respect to elites, is the Communist elite superior to the elite of the

Christian Democratic Party or the Church for that matter? To what extent can there be true democratic freedom if the people have to be prompted, prodded and coerced by a vanguard wielding some banner or other?

A third significant theme running through Calvino's story emerges from the internal contradictions of a 'managed' demos. Amerigo, the progressive intellectual, overthinks, and when he thinks too much, he wavers and struggles to maintain a fixed course towards his goal of a politically and economically free society. He succumbs to a condition of paralysis brought about on by an analytical approach that is not suited to the supralogical world of human interaction and governance, i.e., politics. And while Amerigo is incapacitated, his political adversaries and fellow travelers understand that in politics, one has to be flexible in employing an 'ends justify the means' approach. Such a method rarely inhibits action. And here, Calvino's outlook is not sanguine, as it is men of action, not of contemplation, who will determine the unfolding future of human societies. This notwithstanding, the temporary success of the opposition prevented the Christian Democrats from reaching the popular vote threshold that would have triggered the *legge truffa,* or swindle law as it was commonly known.

Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, *The Remains of the Day*, published in 1989, is in many ways similar to his prior novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*, published three years earlier. Both engage the theme of collaboration with evil. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, the narrator is a Japanese artist reflecting on his professional life, in particular his use of art, to advance the cause of Japanese imperialism during the 1930s, while in *The Remains of the Day*, the narrator, a very correct English butler recollects his service to Lord Darlington who turns out to have been unwittingly used by the German foreign minister, von Ribbentrop, to obtain a favourable view of Hitler's Germany from the British aristocracy. Both are first person narratives, essentially internal monologues with re-created conversations that give a richer context to the memories of the narrator/protagonist and a sense that the narrative is complete and accurate. However, the element of the unreliable narrator presents a fundamental problem for the reader in both novels. How much veracity should the reader place in the narrative given that the narrator freely acknowledges some memory mistakes and yet manages to reproduce lengthy verbatim dialogues? And is the narrator concealing or misrepresenting the past for the sake of getting a 'fairer' hearing? The narrator is, after all, reaching back to the past, and one must acknowledge that one's objectivity is naturally influenced by the passage of time, diminution of faculties and the inherent subjectivity of remembering.

An important difference lies in the fact that in *An Artist of the Floating World*, the narrator/artist, Masuji Ono, is making the case for himself, while in *The Remains of the Day*, Mr. Stevens, the butler, is trying to protect his former employer from what he deems libelous and unfair criticism. In addition, Mr. Stevens explains, as if to justify, his own misguided rigid commitment to his ideal of the imperturbable and impeccably efficient butler at the expense of

interpersonal relationships other than those concerning the performance of his duties. It is this dual collaboration on the part of Lord Darlington with the Nazis and Mr. Stevens with his employer that shadow one another. Neither Lord Darlington nor Mr. Stevens comes off as a particularly agreeable character, though at the conclusion of the novel, Mr. Stevens does appear to have achieved some redemption and a second chance in the remains of day (of his life). Nothing is, however, spoken of Lord Darlington's reaction to having been characterized as a Nazi sympathizer.

Through flashbacks to and reminiscences of his 35 years of service to Lord Darlington at Darlington Hall, Mr. Stevens also slowly unravels the story of his employer's having been deceived by the Germans in the late interwar years. A significant part of the narrative involves what amount to 'transcripts' of conversations. Just as Mr. Stevens motors along to the Dorset coast avoiding the main highways in order to explore the back roads with their hidden views and bypassed villages, his narrative wends its way across three decades and among multiple characters. As in his road trip, he often appears to have gone off track and got lost, but he always finds his way back to where he left the main road and continues on towards his destination. The novel is so well-written and such a pleasure to read that the reader is not inconvenienced by the detours and digressions.

As mentioned earlier, it is highly implausible that Mr. Stevens could have perfectly precise recollections of past conversations with multiple characters at Darlington Hall. And the assumed accuracy of these memories is in stark contrast to those occasions where he freely admits chronological errors of memory. This latter occurs most notably when the housekeeper, Miss Kenton, was overheard by Mr. Stevens to be crying in her room—once after the unexpected death of her aunt, with whom she had a close relationship, and once after informing Mr. Stevens that she would be getting

married and leaving Darlington Hall. On both occasions, Mr. Stevens did not show any emotional feeling, but he later maintains, privately, that he did suffer for not having done so. Only at the very end does he outwardly display signs of empathy for Miss Kenton. Nevertheless, he is, throughout his journey, caught up in deep introspection, not least owing to the revelations that his employer's peace endeavours had been terribly misguided.

Lord Darlington had been convinced that the Versailles Treaty ending World War I was too harsh and resulted in excessive and unnecessary suffering in Germany and worked through unofficial channels to moderate the terms of Germany’s reparations payments. This entailed viewing Hitler and the Nazis in a more favourable light. In a significant encounter the day after a confidential meeting with three British guests in the drawing room of Darlington Hall, Lord Darlington apologized to Mr. Stevens for the embarrassing position his guests had put the butler in the evening before with their technical questions about the Treaty. What Lord Darlington did not regret, however, was the purpose of the demonstration, which was to illustrate why the common man could not contribute anything positive to foreign policy, illustrating the foolishness of universal suffrage and endless parliamentary debate.

> Look at Germany and Italy, Stevens. See what strong leadership can do if it's allowed to act. None of this universal suffrage nonsense there. If your house is on fire, you don't call the household into the drawing room and debate the various options for escape for an hour, do you? It may have been all very well once, but the world's a complicated place now. The man in the street can't be expected to know enough about politics, economics, world commerce and what have you. And why should he? In fact, you made a very good reply last night, Stevens. How did you put it? Something to the effect that it was not in your realm? Well, why should it be?

For his part, Mr. Stevens in calling up that particular conversation notes that there is considerable dissonance between the ideas his employer expressed and those current among Britons, yet he continues to hold fast to the belief that

> [A] butler's duty is to provide good service. It is not to meddle in the great affairs of the nation. The fact is, such great affairs will always be beyond the understanding of those such as you and I, and those of us who wish to make our mark must realize that we best do so by concentrating on what is within our realm.

As it turns out, Lord Darlington proved to have been the amateur as Mr. Lewis, the American senator, had baldly asserted at an earlier unofficial international conference at Darlington Hall.

In a later exchange between Mr. Stevens and the young Mr. Cardinal, son of a now-deceased good friend of Lord Darlington on the occasion of a secret meeting between the British prime minister and foreign minister and von Ribbentrop at Darlington Hall, Mr. Cardinal challenged the butler to consider Germany's treacherous deception of Lord Darlington. Mr. Cardinal had happened to drop by the Hall that evening, though he had in fact been tipped off that von Ribbentrop and the Prime Minister would be meeting—unofficially. He laid it out clearly to Stevens how his godfather, Lord Darlington, had been duped by the Germans.

> You don't understand, Stevens. Well, we're friends and so I'll put it to you frankly. Over the last few years, his lordship has probably been the single most useful pawn Herr Hitler has had in this country for his propaganda tricks. All the better because he's sincere and honourable and doesn't recognize the true nature of what he's doing. During the last three years alone, his lordship has been crucially instrumental in establishing links between Berlin and over

> sixty of the most influential citizens of this country. It's worked beautifully for them. Herr Ribbentrop's been able virtually to bypass our foreign office altogether.

In response, Mr. Stevens declared that he had full faith in Lord Darlington's good judgment and best intentions "to ensure that peace will continue to prevail in Europe." He could not be persuaded that something traitorous was being plotted at Darlington Hall and excused himself to attend to the guests.

Only at the end does Mr. Stevens express some uncertainty about whether he himself had been complicit. In a brief conversation with a man who joins him at the bus stop in Little Compton after Miss Kenton has departed he confides,

> Lord Darlington wasn't a bad man. He wasn't a bad man at all. And at least he had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes. His lordship was a courageous man. He chose a certain path in life, it proved to be a misguided one, but there, he chose it, he can say that at least. As for myself, I cannot even claim that. You see, I trusted. I trusted in his lordship's wisdom. All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. I can't even say I made my own mistakes. Really—one has to ask oneself—what dignity is there in that?

In the penultimate paragraph of the novel, Mr. Stevens experiences a moment of insight, which will guide him through the remains of his days.

> A few minutes ago, incidentally, shortly after the lights came on, I did turn on my bench a moment to study more closely these throngs of people laughing and chatting behind me. There are people of all ages strolling around this

> pier: families with children; couples, young and elderly, walking arm in arm. There is a group of six or seven people gathered just a little way behind me who have aroused my curiosity a little. I naturally assumed at first that they were a group of friends out together for the evening. But as I listened to their exchanges, it became apparent they were strangers who had just happened upon one another here on this spot behind me. Evidently, they had all paused a moment for the lights coming on, and then proceeded to fall into conversation with one another. As I watch them now, they are laughing together merrily. It is curious how people can build such warmth among themselves so swiftly. It is possible these particular persons are simply united by the anticipation of the evening ahead. But, then, I rather fancy it has more to do with this skill of bantering. Listening to them now, I can hear them exchanging one bantering remark after another. It is, I would suppose, the way many people like to proceed. In fact, it is possible my bench companion of a while ago expected me to banter with him—in which case, I suppose I was something of a sorry disappointment. Perhaps it is indeed time I began to look at this whole matter of bantering more enthusiastically. After all, when one thinks about it, it is not such a foolish thing to indulge in—particularly if it is the case that in bantering lies the key to human warmth.

In exchange for the cold always composed dignity of his office, he chooses sensibility and human companionship. He recalls his words to Miss Kenton as they wait for her bus sheltered from the sudden rainstorm—words which exposes a side of himself he rarely, if ever, shared with others. In a frank and stunning admission, Mr. Stevens reflects that he had felt as if “[his] heart was breaking” when Miss Kenton shared her innermost regrets about leaving Darlington Hall and marrying Mr. Benn.

> You're very correct, Mrs Benn. As you say, it is too late to turn back the clock. Indeed, I would not be able to rest if I thought such ideas were the cause of unhappiness for you and your husband. We must each of us, as you point out, be grateful for what we do have. And from what you tell me, Mrs Benn, you have reason to be contented. In fact I would venture, what with Mr Benn retiring, and with grand-children on the way, that you and Mr Benn have some extremely happy years before you. You really mustn't let any more foolish ideas come between yourself and the happiness you deserve.

These were the words of a man who had only just recently told a happenstance inquirer that dignity “comes down to not removing one's clothing in public.”

Adults in the Room: My Battle with Europe's Deep Establishment is the memoir of Yanis Varoufakis, the Greek Minister of Finance in the first six months of 2015. Published in 2017, it is Varoufakis' apologia for his leadership during negotiations with Greece's creditors—the EU and the IMF, often referred to as the 'troika' as the principals are three: the EC, ECB and the IMF. Varoufakis, an academic economist, had been persuaded by the incoming Greek Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras, to join the newly-elected Syriza government and lead the negotiations. Syriza, founded as a party of the radical left, was a relatively young party, established in 2004 and only registered as a party in 2012, and this was its first opportunity to govern. It had won the January legislative election and declared this to be a mandate from voters to renegotiate the EU-IMF bailout in light of the adverse effects of the accompanying austerity requirements—protracted recession, declining incomes and persistent double-digit unemployment.

The new government committed itself to negotiate better terms specifically around restructuring the debt to the EU and IMF and pushing back on the austerity demands related to labour market flexibility (code for weakened worker rights), privatization of government assets, pension reductions and increased taxes. Key to Varoufakis' strategy was the 'nuclear' option to leave the Eurozone (the group of EU countries using the common euro currency) if the creditors refused to budge on debt restructuring (e.g., with respect to interest rates and maturity dates) and the scaling back of austerity measures. Ultimately, it was the Prime Minister's unwillingness to trigger the 'nuclear' option even after an overwhelming rejection of the latest creditor proposals in a July referendum that led to Varoufakis' resigning his cabinet portfolio in opposition to Tsipras' decision to accede to the creditors' demands.

In the book, Varoufakis answers his critics in the party, the government, Europe and elsewhere documenting his actions throughout his tenure as finance minister. In doing so, he leaves the reader with the sense that he single-handedly undertook the herculean task of defending Greek democracy and the victims of the creditors and their bailout—the old and the poor—only to discover that he was endlessly rolling the stone up the hill and seeing it roll back down to where he started. (Varoufakis is well known for his literary references, though less so in this book than in *Talking to My Daughter About the Economy or, How Capitalism Works—and How It Fails*, originally published in 2013 but translated into English in 2017.) He describes his efforts as being directed at adversaries across the table, within Greece's oligarchic and corrupt elite and among the members of his own government. For anyone familiar with working in a complex bureaucratic environment, his accounts of the duplicity, intransigent proceduralism, blatant incompetence, internecine jurisdictional infighting and backstabbing ring true. However, this being a memoir, it is an inherently subjective account of who did what, when and why, though he does provide considerable evidence to support his claims in the main. And for those acquainted with the standard operating procedures of the IMF and the EU's central bank, the ECB, the adversarial relationship between lender and borrower does not appear to be exaggerated. Both lenders have global reputations for being harsh and disinclined to factor in the humanitarian consequences of their enforced fiscal austerity on the general population. Witness the IMF's longstanding treatment of Argentina.

In some respects, Varoufakis' memoir is to be read with caveats similar to those that would apply to reading Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*, both first person introspective narratives thematically focused on the struggle between the individual and their conformity or complicity with dark forces inimical to democracy. While Varoufakis' account does not

quite portray himself as the white knight in battle with dark forces, it does generally present him in a favourable light. He is the protagonist one roots for in his battles with IMF and EU creditors and the conservative Greek establishment. In no way do his words or actions suggest collaboration, yet throughout he defends himself against what he considers to be the false accusations of those who wish to discredit him and thereby his program that threatened to shake up the status quo. In the book, he writes, “Indeed, while these lines are being written a charge of high treason is hanging over me in Greece’s parliament for undermining Prime Minister Tsipras by means of a ‘secret plot’.”

So, just how much veracity should the reader place in the narrative given that the narrator recounts numerous lengthy conversations? The narrator is, after all, reaching back to the past, and one must acknowledge that one's objectivity is naturally influenced by the passage of time, the subjective nature of remembering and the singular objective of a memoir, viz. to get a ‘fairer’ hearing. As an academic he is accustomed to presenting his arguments with extensive notes, references and appendices. And of course, in the age of massive stores of information and data easily accessible by google research, one has to be especially diligent in maintaining accuracy. But absolute objectivity is impossible as the minds of others are fundamentally inscrutable.

There are two important themes in the book that bear mentioning. The first relates to the conflict between bureaucracy and democracy in general and the issue of the democratic sovereignty of Greece as a member of the EU in particular. The second concerns the role of the whistleblower, the outsider, in the context of the individual versus the state. These will be taken in turn.

Varoufakis gives many, many examples of how the bureaucracies of the IMF, EU and Greek state frustrate democracy. First, to the

question whether voters can adequately comprehend the complex issues that are decided by those with information access and expertise in Washington, Brussels and Athens—insiders whose ideological and technical fallibility was exposed to the world during the global financial crisis of 2007-2008. In Chapter 16, Varoufakis recounts a conversation concerning a proposed referendum on whether to accept or reject the creditors' latest proposal in which the Italian foreign minister asks how normal people can be expected to vote on issues beyond their knowledge and understanding. Varoufakis responded,

> We are strong believers in the capacity of the people, of voters, to be active citizens…. And to make a considered analysis and take decisions responsibly concerning the future of their country. This is what democracy is all about.

This gets to a foundational question about democracy. Should the people always defer to their elected representatives or should people also have access to direct democracy, e.g., by means of referendums? Related to this is the question who is to determine which people are qualified to vote. This is one of the themes of Italo Calvino's short story, 'The Watcher,' where the narrator, a poll watcher for the Communist Party in an Italian election, wavers over the seemingly easy question of whether the residents of Turin's Cottolengo Hospital for Incurables, all of whom are incidentally expected to vote for the Christian Democrat in this Catholic facility, can justly be denied the right to vote on account of mental and/or physical disability . . . despite the anti-egalitarian resemblance to Hitler's Germany.

A second aspect of the theme of bureaucracy and democracy is the fact that in the Eurozone (and the EU as a whole for that matter), not all countries are equal. This is especially the case with respect to economic policies that spill over into the political realm. For ex-

ample, if membership in the Eurozone requires compliance with strict deficit and debt levels, why is it that the EU's central bank is more lenient towards Germany and France, the former the dominant economy in the EU and the latter one of the founding members of the EU's precursor, the European Coal and Steel Community? Why are the relatively poor southern European countries—pejoratively referred to as the PIIGS (Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain)—judged to be profligate spenders whose people deserve the severe austerity policies of the IMF and the EU?

To illustrate his antipathy for such second-class citizen treatment, Varoufakis describes a political cartoon by Yannis Ioannou in which,

> Greece appears on her knees, her arms bound behind her back, struggling to escape. A menacing figure representing the EU, wielding an executioner's axe, castigates her for refusing to stay still and place her head obediently on the block: 'Will you at last show a modicum of responsibility?'

And to explain why the Greek demos might be skeptical of the IMF's and EU's good intentions and offended by the intrusion on Greek sovereignty, Varoufakis offers this perception of the foreign creditors:

> For years now groups of technocrats dispatched by the IMF, the European Commission and the European Central Bank had arrived at Athens airport, from which they had been driven at high speed under police escort in a convoy of Mercedes-Benzes to the various ministries, where they had proceeded to interrogate elected ministers and dictate to them policies that affected the lives of millions. Even if these policies had been wonderful, they would have been resented.

A particularly telling anecdote is given in the following exchange,

> ‘You have no right to do this. Just vote no!’
>
> A young woman shouted these words at a member of parliament as he struggled past the Syntagma Square occupiers into Parliament House to vote for one of the Bailoutistan 2.0 bills.
>
> ‘Who are you to judge what I should or shouldn’t vote for?’ he barked back at her as he elbowed his way in, sweat running down his face.
>
> Her devastating answer came effortlessly: ‘Who do I have to be?

Varoufakis believes that the creditors wanted to make an example of Greece, punishing it severely as a deterrent to other debtor countries. Incidentally, this is where the lenders choose to behave with discretion—or bias—giving the lie to the notion that they are being perfectly objective and disallowing politics to influence their economic policymaking. According to him, the fact that Syriza is a leftist party and was challenging the authority of the troika made Greece a perfect target and example for the smaller debtor countries. The exceptions: Germany was the original sponsor of the deficit and debt rules in the Stability and Growth Pact and had the political and economic influence to avoid punishment for breaching the thresholds, and France owing to its status as a founding member and its relative power in the Eurozone could also expect greater latitude in its deficit and debt management. The southern Europeans were the ones who needed the lesson in fiscal discipline.

The second key theme of the book to be presented in this review concerns the role of the whistleblower, which is what Varoufakis considers himself to be. He makes the case that his support for a European solution, i.e., for Greece to remain in the Eurozone, and for a fair and just agreement on resolving Greece’s debt crisis was unflagging from the time he assumed his portfolio as finance minister until the time that he resigned. He maintains that he sought

fairness for both Greece and its creditors and justice for the Greek people as well as for the people of debtor countries across the Eurozone, insofar as a new precedent would be established. One can almost imagine him playing the part of Antigone in Sophocles' eponymous play—or at least seeing himself playing such a role.

* * *

The book is well written and quite accessible to a lay audience. It does not require intimate knowledge of sovereign debt crises, and it is an unexpectedly captivating narrative given subject matter that tends to be abstruse. Varoufakis alternates between being an outsider and an insider weaving a storyline that could even sell in Hollywood as a tale of political intrigue, though much of the internal monologue about the complex struggle between fiscal responsibility and democratic governance would be lost. Nevertheless, the protagonist could be characterized as somewhere between quixotic and worldly-wise. And, unless you are fairly knowledgeable about the events and details of the Greek debt crisis during the period from January to early July 2015, the book is surprisingly suspenseful. For the reviewer, it was not altogether certain exactly how things would turn out in the summer of 2015. Was this in fact a modern-day Greek tragedy?

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The title is taken from remarks made by Christine Lagarde, IMF Managing Director and former French minister of finance, with reference to how participants in the debt negotiations were behaving. It does not appear to have been borrowed from its frequent usage during the Trump Administration, which came later.

First published in *Arts & Opinion*, Vol. 23, No. 6, 2023.

Hernan Diaz published *Trust* in 2022. A year later it won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Diaz is an Argentine author who has lived most of his life abroad due in part to the repressive political climate in Argentina from the early 1970s through the early 1980s. Although having lived in the U.S. for the past quarter century, Diaz would also be quite familiar with the economic disasters that have plagued Argentina since the end of the 20th century—disasters attributable in large part to financiers and speculators. So, while *Trust* is set against the backdrop of America's economic collapse in 1929, it should not be surprising that, for Diaz, recent Argentine economic history elevates the personal importance and relevance of this period in American history. *Trust* is a novel about money and the relationships it mediates. The terms 'bonds,' 'trust' and 'futures' all carry double meanings, each having financially significant references quite different from their common usage. But the novel is also about the authenticity of voice in an amalgamated collection of narratives on the same topic but from incompatible perspectives, none of which commands complete trust.

From the book's Table of Contents, the reader is forewarned that *Trust* is a collection of four texts or writings by different authors. First, there is Harold Vanner whose published novel, *Bonds*, is about the wealthy New York financier, Benjamin Rask, and his wife, Helen—both fictional characters. Second comes the ghostwritten autobiography of Andrew Bevel, the New York financier upon whom *Bonds* is based. He, too, is fictional for the reader, though with respect to Rask, he is 'real.' Third is the memoir of Ida Partenza, the ghostwriter, and last are fragments from Mildred Bevel's (Andrew's wife) diary which Ida happens to find years after her collaboration with Andrew Bevel on his autobiography. Unexplained, these various writings happen to be curated by our author, Hernan Diaz.

* * *

So, who is this Harold Vanner whose novel, *Bonds,* creates the conflict and propels the collected narrative of *Trust* forward? We never meet the man and occasionally wonder whether he is real or apocryphal. We are after all reading Diaz who is clearly influenced by the great Argentine writer, Jorge Luis Borges. At one point we learn that Ida read some of Vanner's works as a college student shortly after her employment as Bevel's ghostwriter. Later, we learn that Bevel, as a means of exacting revenge on Vanner for betraying the memory of Mildred, has removed *Bonds* from circulation in a manner that only a titan of business could manage. Shouldn't we be suspicious when significant mention of Vanner is so sparse? When we are given only such vague clues as the appearance of his name on the Bevel's guest list or the initials HV showing up in Mildred's diary?

Turning to the second text, *My Life*, how trustworthy is the unfinished autobiography? As Bevel's initially stated intention in writing his book is to undercut what he considers libelous suggestions in Vanner's novel, he carefully controls the images projected. Here discrepancies between Vanner's book and the in-progress autobiography raise questions about whose account can be trusted. Even Ida cannot be sure.

She is shocked when Bevel asserts as fact that Mildred used to relate from memory the entire plots of recently read murder mysteries over dinner. That was the moment Ida realized that her literary embellishments drawn from her own life were filling the lacunae in Bevel's own memory of his beloved 'wife.' It was Ida who had been the murder mystery aficionado and she had often recounted what she read to her father in their small railroad apartment. She had inserted the story in *My Life* to fill out the sketchy details of Mildred's existence. So, just how well did Andrew really know his wife? And

how does this affect the credibility of his claim that the purpose of his autobiography is to refute Vanner's book and restore dignity to Mildred's memory?

In *Trust*, the reader cannot quite be sure what is fact and what is fiction. References to reading murder mysteries in the ghostwritten autobiography and Ida's memoirs leads the reader to believe that Andrew and Mildred's story is itself a mystery to be deciphered. What is not clear is whether the reader has enough clues to guess correctly. The fact that the reader is never given sufficient and unequivocal answers leaves the reader without certain knowledge—this being intentional on the part of Diaz who clearly invests in *Trust* some of Borges' tendencies toward the apocryphal, illusory and labyrinthine.

Of all the narrators, Ida is the most informed, yet even she does not truly know the two most important men in her life: Andrew Bevel, the financier capitalist, and her father (no given name provided), a typesetter and ideological anarchist. Neither man completely levels with her, and Diaz does not give us an omniscient view into their minds. For instance, Bevel never acknowledges the role Mildred played in his financial ascent, and Ida's father hints at but never confirms certain details from his anarchist past back in Italy.

* * *

In this next section, several extended quotes illustrate the different voices of the main characters—the financier capitalist/philanthropist, the quixotic anarchist, the ambivalent ghostwriter and the enigmatic woman in Bevel's shadow.

First is the voice of Harold Vanner. His account is highly critical of the financier capitalist type. Though he writes about the fictional characters, Benjamin and Helen Rask, he is generally assumed to be writing about the 'real' Andrew and Mildred Bevel. In the follow-

ing, Vanner, employing his preferred interpretation of Adam Smith, writes that Rask was seen as “the hand behind the invisible hand” and the financier who had engineered the 1929 crash.

> Once this picture became clear enough [the panic of 1929], the public was quick to react. It had been Rask who engineered the whole crash to begin with, people said. Slyly, he had whetted a reckless appetite for debts he knew all along could never be honored. Subtly, he had been dumping his stocks and driving the market down. Artfully, he had leaked rumors and stoked paranoia. Mercilessly, he had overthrown Wall Street and kept it under his thumb with his selling spree the day right before Black Thursday. Everything—the breaks in the market, the uncertainty, the bearishness leading to panic selling, and eventually the crash that would ruin multitudes—had been orchestrated by Rask. His was the hand behind the invisible hand.

But then there is the voice of Andrew Bevel in the language of his ghostwriter, Ida Partenza, regarding the panic of 1929, in which he stresses that he was not the instigator of the panic and the crash and that instead it had been greedy, amateurish speculators and the meddling government through the actions of its inept central bank that had precipitated and exacerbated the financial crisis. It was important for Bevel’s image and legacy that he not be seen as a robber baron but as a shrewd businessman whose private actions in the markets provided a net benefit for society, which, as we are told, had been a fundamental principle guiding the financial activities of his forebears.

> I regret to say that my actions failed to sober up the market. More drastic measures were required. I have always been a guardian of public interest, even when it may seem that my actions go against the public interest. My record of long investments in enterprises that led to America’s

> growth speaks for itself. In 1929, however, disgusted by the depraved greed disrupting the affairs of the Exchange on the one hand and disturbed by the unchecked interventionism of the Federal Reserve on the other, I felt obliged to take a short position. This was not only because it was the reasonable thing to do as a businessman. It was also my attempt, as a concerned citizen, at correcting and purging the market. And just like my forefathers I proved that profit, when responsibly made, is one with the common good.

And next, there is Ida Partenza's *Memoir Remembered*, written long after her service as Bevel's ghostwriter, in which she recounts her father's radical take on financial capitalism—an anarchist's worldview far more dangerous and threatening to capitalism than anything in Vanner's fiction.

> I don't like Marxists, you know that. Their state and their dictatorship. The way they talk, with those bricks of meaning, reducing the world to one single explanation. Like religion. No, I don't like Marxists. But Marx . . . [h]e was right about this. Money is a fantastic commodity. You can't eat or wear money, but it represents all the food and clothes in the world. This is why it's a fiction. And this is what turns it into the measure with which we value all other commodities. What does this mean? It means that money becomes the universal commodity. But remember: money is a fiction; commodities in a purely fantastic form, yes? And this is doubly true for finance capital. Stocks, shares, bonds. Do you think any of these things those bandits across the river buy and sell represent any real, concrete value? No. No, they don't. Stocks, shares and all that garbage are just claims to future value. So if money is fiction, finance capital is the fiction of a fiction. That's what all those criminals trade in: fictions.

But it is only at the conclusion of *Trust*, in Mildred Bevel's diary, *Futures*, that the reader gets a different and unexpected account of her husband's role in 1929. In one of her more lucid moments during her cancer treatment in a Swiss sanatorium far away from media of the day, Mildred reveals a secret that her husband would not have wanted to be known.

> In passing, I once told A that our whole financial system relied on 4 people: the keyboard operators in charge of feeding all the quotes into the New York Stock Exchange ticker. It would take 1 of them to bring the whole market to its knees.
>
> Imagine, I said, if 1 of the 4 keyboard operators could be bribed to provide all the quotes before punching them into the machine. The delays would make it possible to act on this information unnoticed.
>
> Some weeks later, Andrew did just that.
>
> It was obvious, looking at the tape.
>
> The scheme lasted only for a few months. But he made an incalculable fortune. And the myth of Bevel grew till he became a god.
>
> I called him a criminal. He said I couldn't suffer his success.
>
> We barely spoke to each other for about 2 years.

Trust blends multiple perspectives that do not always 'bend and align' with one another let alone the truth, whatever that may turn out to be. The various narrators are all unreliable to some extent and in their own ways, so who does one trust? First, it must be determined who wrote each part. Then, the reader must play the role of detective. Who had motive to distort the truth and which text should the reader privilege as having the most veracity? Is it Harold Vanner, a writer and someone apparently in the Bevel's social circle; Andrew Bevel, who was arguably concerned mostly about how he would appear in future histories; Ida Partenza, an intelligent and

ambitious young woman in her first job; or Mildred Bevel, the ‘beloved’ wife of Andrew Bevel who speaks from a remote cancer clinic?

Having been jolted by stumbling on Mildred’s long-lost diary, Ida secrets it away for further study in order to decipher Mildred’s nearly illegible handwriting. It is no surprise that Ida leaves the Bevel museum—which is what the Bevel house has become—"thinking how lovely it would be to finally hear her voice." These are the last words we hear from Ida. However, the fact that an indecipherable script has been made legible suggests that Ida has indeed finally given Mildred voice. But did she take Mildred's 'voice' at face value? Should we? After all, does Ida, a talented writer, ‘bend and align’ the implicit meaning of selected diary entries to reflect her own preconceived conclusions?

* * *

Because there are four distinct voices narrating throughout the novel, some readers have expressed dissatisfaction with the unevenness of the writing. It is somewhat difficult to read, but that is to be expected given the nature and essence of a novel constructed from loosely linked embedded narratives. And as with any mystery, the reader will not need to be prompted to look back to earlier parts of the novel to review certain details and figure out how the pieces have been put together. Additionally, reading *Trust* does not require but would be enhanced if one is mindful of Argentina's baleful financial history in the 21st century and Borges’ wonderfully challenging writing style.

<via online form>

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October 27, 2024

Dear Vice-President Harris,

I hope that in a couple of weeks, you will be President-Elect Harris.

The disturbing alternative is what I liken to America moving towards something that would resemble the State of Alabama—a 19th century world of white, monied interests and their hangers-on. I never thought I'd see the day when George Wallace—who I had long thought was an Alabama aberration—would be reincarnated.

That said, whether you win the presidential election or not, I hope that afterwards you will do everything in your power to stop this mad endorsement of Israel's indiscriminate war on Arab civilians in Gaza as well as in the West Bank and now Lebanon.

Many say they will boycott your ticket on account of what they consider to be complicity with the Netanyahu regime, and I understand. I agree that the U.S. has wrongly given unending military and diplomatic support for Israel's war on Gaza. Though many different rationalizations have been offered, none justify arming a government, ally or not, that so casually kills civilians as if they're subhuman life forms. Not only does this violate international law but it obliterates the reasons why the international rules of war were so badly in need of being rewritten after World War II. U.S. policy is undermining the fragile collection of post-WWII humanitarian law it helped establish with its precedent-setting actions (and inactions) regarding Israel’s conduct of its war—ostensibly against Hamas.

While U.S. policy in the Middle East is very important to me, it is more important that America not go down the road of fascism. I'm reminded of an absurdist short story, 'The Argentine Ant,' in which Italo Calvino allegorizes how fascism "creeps into everyday life, slowly and insidiously."

Could America do (again) what Israel is doing now?

Regards,

Peter McMillan

Yanis Varoufakis is an academic economist most famous internationally for his six-month controversial stint as the Greek Finance Minister in 2015 in the leftist Syriza government. His take on those six months is recorded in his memoir, *Adults in the Room*, and will not be discussed in this review as my review of the book has already been published in the December 2024 edition of *Arts and Opinion.* The two books reviewed here are of a more general nature concerning economics and politics or political economy, as some put it. The first to be reviewed, *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* (2023) assesses the state of capitalism in the 21st century, while the second, *Another Now* (2021), describes an alternative society to capitalism and technofeudalism à la science fiction. Although an economics professor, his writing in these books is quite accessible without being elementary. Indeed for Varoufakis, "Economics is best seen as a contested terrain on which armies of politically motivated ideas (some favouring the ruling class, others the exploited classes) clash mercilessly to win over our hearts and minds."

In each book, Varoufakis addresses a fundamental question. In *Technofeudalism*, the question is whether the Internet Age heralds a future where capitalism is further entrenched or a future where capitalism's demise is presaged. This question was posed by his father who feared the former outcome. In *Another Now*, the question is what might a post-capitalist world look like. This latter question was raised by a Cockney Tory in an English pub who could not believe there was a better way than capitalism and for whom Varoufakis at the time had no better answer.

To the first question:

> So, what is my hypothesis? It is that capitalism is now dead, in the sense that its dynamics no longer govern our

> economies. In that role it has been replaced by something fundamentally different, which I call technofeudalism. At the heart of my thesis is an irony that may sound confusing at first but which I hope to show makes perfect sense: the thing that has killed capitalism is … capital itself. Not capital as we have known it since the dawn of the industrial era, but a new form of capital, a mutation of it that has arisen in the last two decades, so much more powerful than its predecessor that like a stupid, overzealous virus it has killed off its host. What caused this to happen? Two main developments: the privatisation of the internet by America's and China's Big Tech. And the manner in which Western governments and central banks responded to the 2008 great financial crisis.

So, for Varoufakis, what has fundamentally changed?

> What in the simplest possible terms distinguishes this world from the previous one, demanding that we discard the word capitalism and replace it with technofeudalism? . . . [I]t is very simply this: the triumph of rent over profit.

Key to technofeudalism is the emergence of economic rent as a replacement for economic profit particularly in the tech sector. According to Varoufakis, economic rent, which he refers to as simply 'rent'—though not the same 'rent' as what we think of when we consider landlords and tenants in the housing market—is different from profit in that the latter is realized in a competitive market environment. Economic rent would more closely track with what is commonly regarded as the profit that a monopolist enjoys by virtue of controlling the supply of some commodity via mergers and acquisition, patents, trademarks, brands, etc. Based on this differentiation between economic rent and profit and the fact that the profit motive and competition are fundamental to capitalism, Varoufakis makes the case that firms are essentially rent-seekers

having regressed from capitalism to a form of feudalism where producers do not face competitive markets and instead enjoy the rewards of owning productive resources risk-free. As this phenomenon is most noticeable in the tech industries according to Varoufakis, the form of feudalism, though retrograde (in the eyes of a true capitalist), is technologically advanced hence the term 'technofeudalism.' So, who are the technofeudal lords? They would include names familiar to antitrust and competition regulators worldwide: Amazon, Apple, Google and Facebook (Meta). But also included would be China's Big Five: Alibaba, Tencent, Baidu, Ping An and JD.com.

In my view the natural tendency of the firm is to achieve dominance in a market so that competition is no longer required to maintain profits. The notion of a firm preferring a competitive environment is nonsense. This is standard microeconomic theory thanks to the contributions of economists such as Joan Robinson and Edward Chamberlin through their influential Depression-era works on imperfect competition—imperfect competition being the condition required to produce economic rent. I would argue that many of those who claim to espouse the virtues of competition in the capitalist system fail or refuse to acknowledge that competition, for them, is often just a means to an end, that end being the establishment of control of some market or market niche. This is amply demonstrated in the antitrust suits filed by the Department of Justice and the Federal Trade Commission in the U.S. and the European Commission in the EU. However, I concede that using the term 'technofeudalism' has a certain appeal and therefore may be useful in raising awareness to this latest 'metamorphosis' of capitalism.

Another term that Varoufakis uses frequently to describe the new firms in the emerging technofeudal society is 'cloudalist.' This is a reference to the cloud or the remote digital environment in which Big Tech, much like "an aristocracy of gods dwelling above the

clouds that encircle Mount Olympus, jealously hold[s] on to their exorbitant power over us mortals." Cloudalists charge rent for businesses to market and sell on the cloud, application developers to develop and deploy apps to the cloud and, of course, consumers to buy things. As consumers, we pay rent in the form of our attention which becomes aggregated in complex algorithms that reflect our preferences, interests and desires that are then packaged and sold on to others who get our attention to view their product and/or service offerings, from the news to entertainment and even to job banks.

So, what's wrong with technofeudalism? Here's a hint:

> And so between 2010 and 2021, the paper wealth of these two men [Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk] – meaning the total price of their shares – rose from less than $10,000 million to around $200,000 [million] apiece.

In the 2024 presidential election (or auction) in the U.S., Bezos, current owner of the *Washington Post (*of *Pentagon Papers* fame), decided less than two weeks before the election not to endorse a candidate for the first time since 1988—the Democratic candidate always having received the *Post's* endorsement since then. Robert Kagan, editor-at-large for the *Post* who resigned because of the decision, reported that officials from Bezos' Blue Origins aerospace company which has a multi-billion dollar contract with NASA, met with Trump just a few hours after the *Post* announcement was made public. And Elon Musk is expected to be given an influential role in the new administration. This is the same multi-billionaire who restored Trump's Twitter account (previously cancelled because of Trump's incendiary posts leading up to and following the January 6th insurrection), donated $119 million to the Trump campaign(1) (second only to the $125 million contributed by Timothy Mellon, heir to the Andrew Mellon fortune) and even sponsored a farcical $1

million-a-day voter sweepstakes. But then on the Democrats' side, the *Guardian* reported that a former adviser to Joe Biden asked, "How do you spend $1bn and not win?" giving credence to the growing sense that the American presidential elections are in fact presidential auctions.

In the end, Varoufakis does answer his father's question though not entirely as might have been predicted.

* * *

To the second question, is there a better alternative to capitalism (or technofeudalism)? Three friends—an engineer, an anthropologist and an economist—gain access to a parallel world. This is a science fiction prop and it is really of little importance as it is the message—the message that alternatives to capitalism exist—that matters profoundly and most of all. *Another Now* presents one of those alternatives.

From Eva's perspective as an Ayn Rand-style free market enthusiast,

> [T]he Other Now was brimming with features that any liberal would find hard to resist: an absence of income and sales taxes; the freedom of workers to move from company to company while taking their personal capital with them; the curtailment of large companies' market power; universal freedom from poverty, but also from a welfare state demanding that benefit-recipients surrender their dignity at the door of some social security office; a payments system that was free, efficient and which did not empower the few to print money at the expense of the many; a permanent auction for commercial land that exploited market forces to the full in the interests of social housing; an international monetary system that stabilized

> trade and the flow of money across borders; a welcoming attitude to migrants based on empowering local communities and helping them absorb newcomers.

In contrast, for Iris, the radical and lonely iconoclast, there is no denying the improvements,

> Iris did not dispute that the Other Now had shaken the superflux magnificently. But at what cost? At the cost of freeing markets from the shackles of the mega-firms' and mega-banks' monopoly. And why was this too high a price to pay? Because in her estimation, free markets, which may indeed require the end of capitalism to be fully realized, are not the solution. Markets, capitalist or otherwise, create the habitat in which patriarchy and oppressive power survive. . . . Just as a slight reduction of inequality in the name of social democracy only paved the way for a revival of inequality later on, so the Other Now had merely prolonged the reign of markets over societies.

Costa, the one who stumbles on the wormhole to this parallel world is however terrified at the prospect that the discovery could be picked up by malevolent powers who would use the technology against those who dared speak or write about the possibility of a better system to supersede capitalism. He is determined to destroy the evidence as does Emperor Yuan in Ray Bradbury's short story, 'The Flying Machine.'

Varoufakis' answer to the question is not as clear-cut as the reader might have wished. Thus ends his dream . . . for now.

Endnotes

(1) The *New York Times* reported that “Elon Musk . . . spent over a quarter of a billion dollars in the final months of this year’s election to help Donald J. Trump win the presidency, federal filings revealed.” ‘Elon Musk Backed Trump With Over $250 Million, Fueling the Unusual ‘RBG PAC’, *New York Times*, December 5, 2024.

<via online form>

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November 21, 2024

America's Unconditional Support for the Netanyahu Government

Dear President Biden:

It is with anger and disappointment that I read about your administration's determination to support Israel's indiscriminate way of waging war against the Palestinians in Gaza in violation of U.S. law and international humanitarian law.

There could not have been a better time for your administration to take decisive action to demonstrate America's commitment to protecting civilians in war zones. Voting against a cease-fire in the U.N. Security Council is one opportunity missed. Failure to suspend U.S. weapons transfers to Israel is a second missed opportunity. Instead, tens of thousands of Palestinian civilian casualties will be America's legacy.

I had hoped that after the election, your administration would assert America's foreign policy independence and stop supporting the Netanyahu government, and I expressed this view to Vice-President Harris for whom I voted.

By being Israel's eternal and unconditional 'friend,' America has learned nothing from its past hypocrisies. We are arming a government that casually kills civilians as if they are subhuman life forms. Not only does this violate international law but it obliterates

the reasons why the international rules of war were so badly in need of being rewritten after World War II. U.S. policy is undermining the fragile collection of post-WWII humanitarian law it helped establish with its precedent-setting actions (and inactions) regarding Israel’s conduct of its war.

Contrary to its lip service to a two-state solution, your administration is, in effect, ending its tenure with a full-throated voicing of support for the Netanyahu Government's one-state solution of a Greater Israel with Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem annexed once and for all.

Regards,

Peter McMillan

Published in 2019, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*, is Adom Getachew's first book. It comes recommended by Aslı Ü. Bâli, Professor of International and Comparative Law at Yale Law School, on the occasion of an interview with the *New York Times'* Ezra Klein on the topic of 'The Disastrous Relationship Among Israel, Palestinians and the U.N.' Getachew is Professor of Political Science and Race, Diaspora & Indigeneity at the University of Chicago. The book falls in the category of postcolonial studies. Written for an International Relations (IR) audience and unnecessarily stiff and academic at times, it is nevertheless an interesting and provocative counternarrative to what many of us in North America may be accustomed to. It is by no means the last word, but it does lead the reader to raise questions about our perspective on the Global South. This is especially the case for those of us who are not supremely confident of the virtuousness of Western history in general or U.S. history in particular.

Getachew uses the term 'worldmaking' to refer to the international agenda of anticolonial nationalists. It is a bit confusing, because 'worldmaking' could also be used to describe the international order dictated by the Great Powers at the end of World War I through the League of Nations and at the end of World War II through the United Nations. Her use of the phrase 'the rise and fall of self-determination' is intended to mark the almost euphoric peak of anticolonialist nationalism in the U. N. General Assembly around 1960 and the subsequent deflation of ideals since the 1970s. According to Getachew, U.S. opposition to the growing power of anticolonialist nationalism in the U.N. is represented by the views of former U.N. Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan and the ideological victory of neoliberalism (the retooled theory of market capitalism, aided by the state) after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. Getachew quotes Moynihan saying that the economic conditions of the Third World

are “of their own making and no one else’s,” which she wholeheartedly disputes.

In the Introduction, Getachew explains that anticolonialist worldmaking is about more than just nominal statehood. Its essence is that the new states created from decolonization must achieve full independence in political and economic affairs and equality vis-à-vis other nation-states recognized by the U.N. and the international community.

> Against the standard view of decolonization as a moment of nation-building in which the anticolonial demand for self-determination culminated in the rejection of alien rule and the formation of nation-states, I recast anticolonial nationalism as worldmaking. The central actors of this study reinvented self-determination reaching beyond its association with the nation to insist that the achievement of this ideal required juridical, political, and economic institutions in the international realm that would secure nondomination. Central to this claim was an expansive account of empire that situated alien rule within international structures of unequal integration and racial hierarchy. On this view, empire was a form of domination that exceeded the bilateral relations of colonizer and colonized. As a result, it required a similarly global anticolonial counterpoint that would undo the hierarchies that facilitated domination.

Getachew notes in particular the perpetuation of hierarchy, especially through racialized structures, in the League and the U.N. by means of mandates and trusteeships, respectively. In each postwar international order, former colonies were not accorded the same measure of respect as European nation-states. She cites the League’s tacit acquiescence to Italy’s ‘humanitarian intervention’ in Ethiopia (the country of her birth) in 1935. She acknowledges that Italy used Ethiopia’s continuing slave trade as a pretext for the in-

vasion, but she then points to the hypocrisy stating that “by invoking Ethiopia’s barbarism a month before its invasion, Italy prepared for the use of overwhelming violence, illegal use of mustard gas, indiscriminate killings of noncombatants, the torture of captured soldiers, and other war crimes.”

The case of Italy’s ‘humanitarian intervention’ in Ethiopia illustrates one of the persistent difficulties in international relations, viz., can one or more nation-states wage a just, i.e., legally defensible, war against another recognized member of the international community based on the egregious violations of human rights? Obviously, given the reality of international affairs, if the human rights violator is one of the Great Powers or a permanent and unconditional ally of a Great Power, then the question would need to be phrased ‘should’ instead of ‘can.’

An additional issue surfaces when comparing divergent opinions on collective versus individual human rights. Here, Getachew believes that there is a split between former colonial states and former colonized states. The former tend to advocate for the priority of individual human rights while the latter argue that collective human rights must be established first. For that to happen, the former colony must have complete sovereignty over its internal affairs. Getachew looks for support from Hannah Arendt’s critique of the enumeration of the rights as, for example, in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, from which she quotes “the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them.” This, however, leaves it open for nation-building to proceed apace regardless of domestic human rights abuses—a result Arendt would not have tolerated either. At issue are two fundamental principles of international law—sovereignty of the nation-state and the universal entitlement to human rights—principles which are in no way mutually inclusive.

In addition to external threats to the integrity of the newly-created states, there are powerful internal forces that imperil their unity. Getachew cites two examples where the fracturing of the nation-state occurred from within: the Katanga province's secession from the Congo and Biafra's secession from Nigeria. In both cases, the demands for self-determination were made by groups with these countries, but the secessions were short-lived. In essence, the roles of former colonizer and colonial had been re-staged with the former colonies playing both roles. This is yet another unsettled area of international law: just how granular can the principle of self-determination be?

A significant and common view that Getachew takes issue with is that there is an inevitable trend towards the Westernization of the world. (This was famously proclaimed by Francis Fukuyama at the end of the Cold War.) She states that

> [T]he alien rule thesis, with its view of decolonization as the diffusion of the nation-state, positions anticolonial nationalists as agents of expansion who appropriated Western ideals of self-government. This globalization is largely celebrated as the realization of the universal ambitions of Western modernity but often also raises concerns that the appropriation of Western ideals is either premature or inapplicable in non-Western societies.

Naturally, this is offensive to anticolonial nationalists in two senses: first, the suggestion that non-Western societies are destined for a derivative, as opposed to authentic, form of self-government, and second, that Western ideals may be forever out of reach. The second sense suggests a fundamental and unbridgeable gap, as Antony Anghie put it, between the West and the rest or the civilized and the uncivilized or the developed and undeveloped. Here is

where Getachew observes the Western racial hierarchization that characterized Western colonialism.

One of the more interesting contrasts among anticolonial nationalist views is recounted in the debate in Africa and the West Indies over the nature of the new nation-states. There was significant disagreement. Federalism in the West Indies and Africa pitted some anticolonial nationalists (Trinidad, Ghana, Mali) for strong central government and against those (Jamaica, Ethiopia, Nigeria) favouring some form of union of strong nation-states. Kwame Nkrumah, the first prime minister of independent Ghana, advocated for the former, while Nnamdi Azikiwe, the first president of independent Nigeria, supported the latter, even suggesting the term ‘miniature United Nations.’

Getachew concludes with the verdict that the neoliberal agenda, sometimes in the form of neocolonialism (colonialism with indirect controls, e.g., by international organizations), defeated the aspirations of the anticolonial nationalists who sought a strong and assertive form of self-determination as their nations joined the international community.

Though Getachew does not assert as much, the hanging question is obvious. Given that U.S. foreign policy and the economic doctrine of neoliberalism were both instrumental in forestalling the Global South’s ambitions, what was the nature of the connection between government policy and economic theory? Was one devised to serve the other? And which one was preeminent? Moynihan’s comment noted earlier gives a hint.

The following extended quote from Getachew brings the matter to a close . . . for now.

In formulating his strategy of opposition, Moynihan had hoped that the United States would recapture the UN and reassert a liberal rule-based international order. However, owing in part to the backlash against this anticolonial appropriation and the loosening of the Cold War's restraints, what gradually followed was an American defection from postwar international institutions. Rather than reclaim international institutions, American policy makers embraced "a new sovereigntism" that rejected the incorporation of international norms and advocated military intervention without international authorization.

Published in 2005, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law* is Antony Anghie's seminal book on the connection between European colonialism and modern international law, and as such it is an important text in postcolonial studies. It was one of four valuable book recommendations(1) by Aslı Ü. Bâli, Professor of International and Comparative Law at Yale Law School, on the occasion of an interview with the *New York Times'* Ezra Klein on May 17, 2024. Anghie is Professor of International Law, National University of Singapore and Professor of Law at the University of Utah.

Anghie's thesis is that modern international law is to a great extent a product of Europe's interactions with the non-Western world since the 'discovery' of America. Anghie returns to the 16th century when the Spanish theologian and jurist, Francisco de Vitoria, produced the rudimentary beginnings of international law in the context of Spain's colonization of the West Indies. It was here and then that the opposition of European and non-European cultures led to the framing of what Anghie regards as a very asymmetric law of nations. Anghie's narrative then picks up again later in the 19th century with the European contest for colonies accelerated—a global phenomenon nowhere better illustrated than in the Berlin Conference (1884-85) and the divvying up of Africa's land and people. Then, in the 20th century, the two world wars gave rise to the first international institutions to unite Europe and non-Europe.

> International law is universal. It is a body of law which applies to all states regardless of their specific and distinctive cultures, belief systems and political organizations. It is a common set of doctrines which all states, whether from Europe or Latin America, Africa or Asia use to regulate

> relations with each other. The association between international law and universality is so ingrained that pointing to this connection appears tautologous; it is today hard to conceive of an international law which is not universal. And yet, the universality of international law is a relatively recent development. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that a set of doctrines was established as applicable to all states, whether these were in Asia, Africa or Europe.

After this précis of where things stand now, Anghie delivers his bold assertion that modern international law's origins are quite different from what might be assumed by students of international relations (IR) who follow the standard evolutionary narrative of European-based international law.

> The universalization of international law was principally a consequence of the imperial expansion which took place towards the end of the 'long nineteenth century'.

And later, Anghie elaborates on how imperialism and the relationship between the Europeans and non-Europeans helped shape a previously Eurocentric law among nations:

> [T]he nineteenth century could be said to embody a particular set of attitudes and methods. It posits an essentialist dichotomy between the non-European and the European; it characterizes relations between these entities to be inherently antagonistic; it establishes a hierarchy between these entities, suggesting that one is advanced, just and authoritative while the other is backward, violent and barbaric; it asserts that the only history which may be written of the backward is in terms of its progress towards the advanced; it silences the backward and denies it any subjectivity or autonomy; it assumes and promotes the centrality of the civilized; and it contemplates no other ap-

> proaches to the problems of society than those which have been formulated by the civilized. Many of these elements are evident in the work of prominent international relations scholars from Samuel Huntington's influential argument regarding the 'clash of civilizations', to Francis Fukuyama's assertions as to the 'end of history'.

Ironically, the international law described by Anghie appears to be reducible to the law of the jungle. It appears otherwise owing to the law's institutionalization intended, among other things, to make international law respectable for polite society. This seems to be the case across all Anghie's named schools of thought: the secular naturalism of Vitoria and Grotius, the positivist system with its superimposed layer of science to remediate the metaphysical turn of the naturalists and justify the proceedings of the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, and the pragmatism that followed World War I and became manifest through international institutions such as the League of Nations' mandate system, the United Nation's trusteeship system, and the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) of the of the IMF and the World Bank. Not surprisingly, the same would be true of the 4th school of thought hinted at towards the end of the book—American exceptionalism.

With respect to these different schools of thought, Anghie finds commonality in what he characterizes as an unbridgeable gap separating the European and non-European worlds. This gap is variously framed in the oppositions of civilized versus uncivilized and developed versus undeveloped or underdeveloped.

> [His] argument is that while these schools are distinctive, what is disturbing is that they all have served to reproduce colonial relations. It is in this sense that [he] argue[s] that, far from being ancillary to the discipline, colonialism is central to its very constitution.

Furthermore, “formal acquisition of sovereignty and equality did not translate into the real power that the Third World states had hoped for.”

> [T]the continuing effect of the colonial encounter and the persistence of the structure of the civilizing mission . . . creates this discrepancy. The innovations and reforms of the UN period served in important ways to reproduce and reinstate the inequalities and power disparities that had characterized formal colonialism. These same issues informed [Anghie’s] analysis of Mandate System . . . which attempted to examine why it was that non-European sovereignty was somehow destined to become distinctive and dependent and lacking in real economic power.

In the nearly two decades since Anghie’s book appeared, the world has become more multipolar and the opportunities for America’s global hegemony have significantly diminished with China’s rapid economic growth and increasingly activist foreign policy in the Global South, America’s back-to-back failures in nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the spectacle of a second mass bloodletting in Europe ending the pretensions of lessons learned from the two 20th century world wars—an atavistic turn to days of the Thirty Years’ War that occasioned Grotius *Laws of War and Peace* and the observation that “Throughout the Christian world I have seen a lawlessness in warfare that even barbarian races would think shameful.” It was the cruel reality of the inevitability of warfare that prompted Grotius to attempt to ‘civilize’ it.

Finally, the Global South—the post-Cold War term for the Third World—appears to be exerting influence on the global stage by means of alliances such as BRICS (originally Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa but now including Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia and the U.A.E.) and the G20 (19 countries including the original five BRICS members, all seven members of the G7 as well as Argenti-

na, Australia, Indonesia, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Turkey. An evolutionary path towards greater equality among nations could expect Anghie's full endorsement. However, deep reforms of the U.N. and the IFIs, i.e., the existing international order, seem improbable, despite calls from the Global South for a fairer system. Nothing short of a worldwide catastrophe would seemingly be required, given that the League of Nations and the U.N. could only have arisen after such shocking and protracted global periods of violence as World War I and World War II. Imagine for a moment the conditions that would have to obtain in our world for it ever to be conceivable that the U.S. (or the U.K. or France or Russia or China) would lose or voluntarily give up its U.N. Security Council veto.

Endnotes

(1) The other three are: *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (2019) by Adom Getachew, *The Constitutional Bind: How Americans Came to Idolize a Document That Fails Them* (2024) by Aziz Rana, and *Justice for Some*: *Law and the Question of Palestine* (2019) by Noura Erakat. This reviewer has written articles on the first of the two texts.

The Guns of August (1962) by Barbara Tuchman and *Paris 1919* (2001) by Margaret MacMillan are histories of the first world war of the 20th century—total war fervour for God and country, wartime abominations in defiance of what little humanitarian international law there was, ubiquitous rapid-fire machine guns for mass killing from a distance, ocean-going torpedo-bearing submarines tracking military and civilian targets, aerial bombers, poison gas, and so forth. Tuchman's book focuses on the diplomacy and battles of the first month of World War I, August 1914, while MacMillan's concentrates on the six months of 'peacemaking' from the 1918 armistice to the 1919 Versailles Treaty. Both are accessible and informative reads; Tuchman's is superior in one important respect: "she makes the events of August, 1914, as suspenseful on the page as they were to the people living through them." Both rely heavily on the importance of personalities and interpersonal relationships, an approach that leaves the reader convinced that the great decisions of war and peace are made by mere mortals, fallible at every turn.

These books about a war more than a century ago, a war that was once said to be the war to end all wars, speak of an era that does not seem so foreign anymore, given the return of war among the great powers in Europe and the prospects of a 3rd world war that threatens to draw in not just the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council—the Great Powers at the end of World War II, the U.S., Britain, France, the U.S.S.R (now Russia) and China—but the rest of the world through the connections of these Great Powers with their treaty partners. Both books spend a great deal of time addressing diplomacy at the highest level of national governments and reveal a world of international relations governed by the irrational self-interest of nations, their leaders and their people. Then as now, the political class who most of the time earn the pub-

lic's disrespect and even contempt are shown to be inexplicably capable of mobilizing mass hatred and the drive to kill and dispossess an 'enemy,' whoever that might be.

The first, Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August*, comes recommended by Jim Sciutto in *The Return of the Great Powers* (2024):

> The same year the Cuban Missile Crisis unfolded, in 1962, Barbara Tuchman released her chronicle of Europe's inexorable tumble into World War I, *The Guns of August*. President John F. Kennedy had read her book and, as the US and Russia sat on the brink of nuclear war, he was determined to learn from the mistakes of world leaders half a century before him—and to avoid repeating them.

According to Tuchman, the seeds of the Treaty of Versailles were sown in the 1870 Franco-Prussian War, which marked the birth of modern Germany. While MacMillan disputes the commonplace notion that "the Treaty of Versailles, whose harsh terms would ensure a second war," it is nevertheless clear from her account of the Paris Peace Conference relative to many of the world's hotspots—the Balkans, the border between France and Germany, the disputed Shandong (Shantung) Peninsula of northern China and the partitioned lands of the Ottoman Empire in the Levant and Palestine—that the peacemakers were unsuccessful in redrawing the world map in such a way as to prevent future conflicts some no more than a generation away.

While both books provide meaningful insights into how wars start and how the ensuing peace often contributes to war further down the road, there are two common shortcomings. First, neither adequately probes the economic rationale of war and peace in order to determine the prime movers. Tuchman and MacMillan take the reader behind the scenes to witness some of the planning and de-

cision-making by government and military leaders, but neither gives a proper account of who and what drives the mobilization of these leaders to give the orders that will predictably lead to massive casualties. In other words, who conducts the cost-benefit analysis of war and just how much weight is really given to the lives of civilians and ordinary soldiers? Another way of framing the question is what part of society benefits the most from wars and what part assumes the greatest risks? Furthermore, whose voices count the most and does it matter whether the government is classified as authoritarian or democratic?

The second has to do with the nations and peoples not included in Europe and the English-speaking world—what in the years of the Cold War was aggregated into the category of the Third World and since the collapse of the Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe (the Second World) is now referred to as the Global South. What is missing in these two texts is what Antony Anghie attempted in *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law* (2005)—to provide "an alternative history of sovereignty, a history that focuses not on events in Europe but on the colonial confrontation between non-European and European societies." MacMillan concedes that "[The peacemakers] took pains over the borders in Europe, even if they did not draw them to everyone's satisfaction, but in Africa they carried on the old practice of handing out territory to suit the imperialist powers. In the Middle East, they threw together peoples, in Iraq most notably, who still have not managed to cohere into a civil society." Note that MacMillan is writing prior to the post-9/11 war (illegally) waged on Iraq by the U.S.

In *The Guns of August*, Tuchman focuses solely on Germany as the cause of World War I and never mentions the great power conflict over colonies or the treatment of colonials by the British, French and Belgians. In fact, Tuchman's chapters on diplomacy and battles read like a narrative from the Avalon Hill board game,

‘Diplomacy,’ occasionally punctuated by reminders of the atrocities of the war. In ‘Diplomacy,’—an exclusively European affair—the seven European powers, represented by Britain, France, Austria-Hungary, Germany, Italy, Russia and Turkey, each seek to maximize control over the map of Europe by means of negotiations backed by the strength of their armies and navies. In Avalon Hill’s ‘Diplomacy,’ the conflicts are fully sanitized, although the players can hardly escape falling into the logic of armed conflict as a means to national goals.

Where Tuchman lays the war guilt on Germany alone, MacMillan, having already denied Germany’s use of the Versailles Treaty as a legitimate *casus belli*, devotes her criticism of the peace conference to the aggrandizing aims of the Allies and other European states who rushed in to take advantage of the collapse of the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman empires. The ideal and wholly impractical Wilsonian notion of self-determination manifests itself in the reality of ethnonationalist struggles for land on Germany’s borders in the East and the West, on the western borders of Russia, in the Balkans, in Anatolia, and in the Levant and Palestine. Incidentally, getting back to an earlier point regarding the exclusion of Europe’s colonial holdings, Wilson’s promise of self-determination was never intended to be a universal human right, i.e., a right to be exercised by non-Europeans as well as Europeans.

For today’s reader in the 21st century, these histories are useful as a reminder that the spirit of age, as often portrayed in government press releases and the stories told by the news media, may not align with the full truth. And for more reading on that, the reader is referred to Phillip Knightley’s *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-maker from the Crimea to Kosovo* (2002 edition). The first casualty is ‘the truth.’

As a side note, Barbara Tuchman was the granddaughter of Henry Morgenthau, President Woodrow Wilson's ambassador to the Ottoman Empire during World War I, when he famously drew attention to the Turkish genocide against Armenians. Mehmed Talaat, de facto head of the Ottoman Empire, wrote the following in a German newspaper in 1916, inauspiciously foreshadowing arguments advanced in our 21st century, albeit with a different cast of characters:

> We have been blamed for not making a distinction between guilty and innocent Armenians. [To do so] was impossible. Because of the nature of things, one who was still innocent today could be guilty tomorrow. The concern for the safety of Turkey simply had to silence all other concerns.

MacMillan is the great granddaughter of David Lloyd George, the British prime minister during World War I who figures prominently and is generally treated favourably in the narrative.

In its brevity (slightly over 200 pages), Anne Applebaum's *Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World*, published in 2024, takes aim at the world of autocratic nation-states for whom ideology is secondary and concentrated state power is turned to the service of a kleptocratic elite. Applebaum, who also wrote *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (a political memoir) in 2020, writes in the tradition of Hannah Arendt, author of *On the Origins of Totalitarianism*, and recently penned an introduction to that work. However, while Arendt focused on the ideology-driven totalitarian regimes in Germany and the U.S.S.R., Applebaum, though a recognized journalist/historian on Soviet communism, is in this book primarily concerned with those autocracies—be they "communists, monarchists, nationalists, [or] theocrats—that seek to undermine democracy and the world order and share "a ruthless single-minded determination to preserve their personal wealth and power."

> Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Angola, Myanmar, Cuba, Syria, Zimbabwe, Mali, Belarus, Sudan, Azerbaijan, and perhaps three dozen others share a determination to deprive their citizens of any real influence or public voice, to push back against all forms of transparency or accountability, and to repress anyone, at home or abroad, who challenges them.

On the other hand, according to Applebaum, the Saudi and Emirate monarchies, the authoritarian communist regime in Vietnam and the illiberal democracies of Turkey, Singapore, India, the Philippines, and Hungary are not imminent threats to the international order.

Applebaum views the nation-state as the locus of the international struggle between democracies and autocracies. She recognizes the somewhat fluid boundaries as nation-states are subject to change, either from democracy to autocracy (Hungary) or from autocracy to democracy (South Korea), though the latter has been less frequent of late. She also acknowledges that within nation-states there are contrary movements, as for example in the U.S. Since the book was published in July, it was still uncertain who the next U.S. president would be. However, Applebaum did make it a point to assert that "If [Trump] ever succeeds in directing federal courts and law enforcement at his enemies, in combination with a mass trolling campaign, then the blending of the autocratic and democratic worlds will be complete." An ominous and odious outcome for a former leader of the free world.

There are three significant shortcomings in an otherwise excellent overview of the state of the world's autocracies. First, the classification of states as democratic, autocratic or somewhere in-between is oversimplified. Characterizing the countries of the West as democratic is problematic given their plutocratic and corporatist tendencies—tendencies that are inherently anti-democratic. In addition, this categorization whitewashes a lot of Western wrongs from the past, which is by no means to say that there is a moral equivalence with the crimes of Stalin, Hitler and Mao. Notwithstanding arguments from countries like Russia and China, there is a great gulf between the degree of freedom enjoyed in the U.S. vis-à-vis Russia or China. Applebaum concedes as much yet concludes,

> They [liberal democracies] are hardly perfect. Those that exist have deep flaws, profound divisions, and terrible historical scars. But that's all the more reason to defend and protect them. So few of them have existed across human history; so many have existed for a short time and then failed.

Yet, it is unfortunate that Applebaum does not call out the anti-democratic forces operating within the liberal democracies, e.g., the increasing inequality of income and wealth, the deliberate disenfranchisement of voters, the obvious connection between war and profits, etc. Ukraine offers the best example of how fundamental economic policy is to war. Post-war Ukraine promises to be an exemplar of Schumpeterian creative-destruction, and many billions of dollars in profit will be made rebuilding the country and, of course, restocking the world's arms supplies. Last year at the two-year mark in the Russia-Ukraine War, the World Bank, the United Nations and the European Commission estimated the cost of reconstruction and recovery to be nearly half a trillion dollars.

A second shortcoming has to do with the conduct of war. Applebaum barely mentions Israel's outrageous total war against all of Gaza in retaliation for Hamas' unpardonable October 7th massacre of civilians in southern Israel. Equally ignored is the effectively unconditional military and diplomatic support of the U.S. for Israel's prosecution of the war, the examples set by the U.S. with its abysmal failures in nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan, and its record of war crimes against civilians in Vietnam and World War II. (U.S. Air Force General Curtis Lemay reportedly said about the firebombing of civilians in Tokyo and other Japanese cities in 1945, "I suppose if I had lost the war, I would have been tried as a war criminal." Lemay was the inspiration for the Air Force General in Stanley Kubrick's 1964 classic satire, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*). That the U.S. remains preferable to Russia, Iran, North Korea or China doesn't excuse America from submitting to the authority of international jurisprudence if there is to be anything called law among nations. As Antony Anghie writes in *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law,* there is a school of thought in international relations, traceable back to John Austin, the early 19th century British jurist, that maintains that "international law [is] not law properly so called because it

[does] not emanate from a single, global sovereign." Instead, what one has is a code of international morality. If the great powers and their close allies are essentially lawgivers unto themselves in international affairs, then Austin is correct.

A third shortcoming is that the book does not address the worldwide phenomenon of the ever expanding role of the government to meet the ever increasing demands for public assistance, e.g. favourable tax treatment, corporate subsidies, investment opportunities, jobs, home ownership and the much-maligned welfare assistance for the poor. Satisfying these demands gives rise to greater concentrations of government authority, and this becomes problematic when not all of those expectations can be realized. What has happened in the U.S. is that the citizenry look to the president to make things right and to do so quickly when Congress and the courts disappoint. In foreign affairs and on the economy, Americans are inclined to a strong CEO model, which invests the presidency with enormous power through the vast bureaucracy of the executive branch. It is that concentrated power that different constituencies seek as the prize to be won, but it is that power that is subject to extraordinary abuses, especially when the legislature and the courts serve the president and not the constitution, i.e., when they fail to check the exercise of presidential power.

Despite these criticisms, the book is recommended because Appleby is doing her part to keep alive the spirit of resistance in an age when the fear and anger of the public in many societies has turned again to the strongman (a variation of der Übermensch). This figure, unrestrained and unconstrained, is perfectly positioned to disregard the accepted norms and legal guardrails in responding to the voice of the people. And once in power, the objectives are twofold: to stay in power and to profit from that power. This is not the nightmare that Appleby envisions. It is the reality that she describes.

Nevertheless, Applebaum is optimistic enough to conclude with a challenge.

> [T]the democracies of North America, Latin America, Europe, Asia, and Africa, together with the leaders of the democratic opposition in Russia, China, Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, Belarus, Zimbabwe, Myanmar, and other autocratic states, should think about the struggle for freedom not as a competition with specific autocratic states, and certainly not as "war with China," but as a war against autocratic behaviors, wherever they are found: in Russia, in China, in Europe, in the United States. Toward this end, we need networks of lawyers and public officials to fight corruption inside our own countries and around the world, in cooperation with the democratic activists who understand kleptocracy best. We need military and intelligence coalitions that can anticipate and halt lawless violence. We need economic warriors in multiple countries who can track the impact of sanctions in real time, understand who is breaking them, and take steps to stop them. We need people willing to organize online and coordinate campaigns to identify and debunk dehumanizing propaganda. The autocracies want to create a global system that benefits thieves, criminals, dictators, and the perpetrators of mass murder. We can stop them.

* * *

A worthwhile introduction to Anne Applebaum's views can be found in an interview with Ezra Klein on November 19, 2024. The audio and audio transcript are available at https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/19/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-anne-applebaum.html under the title 'Trump Kicks Down the Guardrails.' At the end of the interview, Applebaum shares the following three book recommendations for those interested in reading more about "the secret world of money laundering and kleptocracy:"

- *Moneyland: The Inside Story of the Crooks and Kleptocrats Who Rule the World* (2019) by Oliver Bullough
- *American Kleptocracy: How the U.S. Created the World's Greatest Money Laundering Scheme in History* (2021) by Casey Michel and
- *Offshore: Stealth, Wealth and the New Colonialism* (2024) by Brooke Harrington.

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In her influential article, 'Amazon's Antitrust Paradox,'(1) published in *The Yale Law Journal* in 2017, Lina, Khan, the current Commissioner of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), lays out a preliminary case for the break-up of Amazon based on its anticompetitive business practices. Khan relies on an older view of antitrust policy (or competition policy as it is termed in most countries), which she maintains is consistent with the original intent of America's early antitrust legislation. For this she cites the Sherman Act (1890) and the Clayton and FTC acts (1914). This puts her in opposition with the current body of antitrust jurisprudence which has for the last forty-plus years favoured a *laissez-faire* approach to business concentrations in horizontal markets (mergers) and vertically integrated markets so long as 'consumer welfare' is advanced. 'Consumer welfare' as advocated by Robert Bork—the principal jurist identified in her paper— and the Chicago School of antitrust(2) espouses a non-interventionist antitrust policy. Initially associated with the University of Chicago, today, these views are generally regarded as the most popular among lawyers, judges and economists in the U.S.(3) In their view, monopolies are not inherently harmful; to be harmful, a monopolist must manipulate prices and output to the disadvantage of customers.

Khan explains why contemporary thinking about antitrust is outdated and inadequate both in a general sense and specifically in the instance of Amazon.

> Focusing antitrust exclusively on consumer welfare is a mistake. For one, it betrays legislative intent, which makes clear that Congress passed antitrust laws to safeguard against excessive concentrations of economic power. This vision promotes a variety of aims, including the preservation of open markets, the protection of producers and

> consumers from monopoly abuse, and the dispersion of political and economic control. Secondly, focusing on consumer welfare disregards the host of other ways that excessive concentration can harm us—enabling firms to squeeze suppliers and producers, endangering system stability (for instance, by allowing companies to become too big to fail).

The title of Khan's paper, 'Amazon's Antitrust Paradox,' is her response to Bork's *Antitrust Paradox* (1978). Hers is targeted at one firm, Amazon, while his is more general and theoretical and thus intended to apply more widely. For Bork, the paradox is that while a dominant company in a given market may seem to be dangerous, as long as no reduction in consumer welfare can be brought in evidence, then the company's dominant position cannot and should not be regarded as harmful; therefore, the company should not be punished. In fact, efficiencies of scale may just as likely result in pricing and production outcomes more favourable for consumers. The key assumption would be that a company will be guided primarily by the motive to maximize profits. That is standard price theory for the firm. Such is not the case for Khan, who believes that harm does not have to have already occurred as price increases; it is the potential that market dominance creates to do harm. Thus, harm should not be limited simply to consideration of prices and output, especially as these are manifested in the short-term. Over the longer term, gross asymmetries in market power can have broader negative economic and political consequences, in addition to price rises, reductions in quality, less choice, and retarded innovation. For Khan, the paradox in Amazon's case is that it is not irrational, as Chicago School economist contend, for a company to pursue increased market share at the expense of profits, as the long-term stream of profits accruing to a dominant company promise greater and more sustainable profitability for the company.

Informing Khan's case is the judgment that the purpose of U.S. anti-trust legislation has been lost in the court decisions and agency reviews (by the Department of Justice and the FTC) of the past four-plus decades, which focus too narrowly on harm as reflected in negative price and output outcomes. Missing is the originally intended focus on the process and structure of competitive markets, which considers the effects of harmful business concentrations that do not necessarily show up in analyses guided by standard microeconomic price theory. Such effects include the potential of anticompetitive behaviour to stifle innovation, relax product quality control as well as raise barriers to entry, all of which tend to be manifested over a period of time. In addition, one would expect that the effects of anticompetitive business concentrations reach public policy areas such as labour markets, consumer safety and environmental protection. Even the electoral process is not immune as was seen in the 2024 presidential election where the demonstration of political influence by Jeff Bezos, founder and former CEO of Amazon (now the executive chairman), included a last-minute and surprising refusal by his newspaper, the *Washington Post*, to endorse a presidential candidate, who traditionally has been the Democratic presidential nominee; the secret meetings that followed between executives of Blue Origins, Bezos' aerospace company (a direct competitor with Elon Musk's SpaceX), and Trump; and the million dollar contribution to Trump's inauguration. Incidentally, all of these actions are consistent with the new (and non-nerdy) Washington-savvy Bezos that journalist Dana Mattioli has reported. Khan's quote from Senator John Sherman at the time the Sherman Act was passed by Congress fairly sums up her own position with respect to the anti-democratic effects of anticompetitive business concentrations:

> If we will not endure a king as a political power, we should not endure a king over the production, transportation, and sale of any of the necessities of life. If we would not submit

> to an emperor, we should not submit to an autocrat of trade, with power to prevent competition and to fix the price of any commodity.

For Khan, the evidence of anticompetitive behaviour is credible and consistent with the very sorts of monopoly abuse targeted by America's early antitrust legislation, e.g., John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Trust. However, in her view, these laws and the existing jurisprudence in contemporary American antitrust requires updating to reflect a new era, the Internet Age, where many of the Chicago School's bedrock assumptions are no longer valid. For example, predatory pricing behaviour according to which a firm underprices its product to drive a rival out of the market is not regarded as relevant by the Chicago School. Since predatory pricing is irrational behaviour for a profit-maximizing company and since companies do not behave irrationally, the issue of predatory pricing is moot. In other words, predatory pricing does not exist, and what is often characterized as 'predatory pricing' is actually legal. Kahn answers that it is by no means irrational for Amazon to seek greater market share at the expense of short-term profits. When Amazon initially forgoes profit in order to secure a commanding share of the market, it positions itself over the long term to be the dominant firm to raise prices, lower production standards (including worker and consumer safety and product quality) and slow the pace of innovation. While no market can be said to be captured for once and all, the barriers to entry prevent competitors from replicating Amazon's Internet platform (a platform is the digital space where customers and businesses engage one another in commerce) are considerable. This is evidenced by the fact that no company has done so yet and many would-be competitors prefer to use Amazon for marketing and sales and product fulfillment. This despite the fact that Amazon often preferentially markets its own products to compete with its customer vendors who use its platform.

Khan provides an overview of four case studies where Amazon has demonstrated harmful anticompetitive behaviour—using predatory pricing to establish dominance in markets (bestseller e-books); using its dominant Internet platform to advantage its new lines of business (Quidsi baby products) and establish a dominant position in logistics and delivery (Fulfillment by Amazon); and exploiting the extensive data that Amazon extracts from its Marketplace customers to support the development of private label Amazon products by means of targeting profitable product lines of its business customers and using its proprietary online platform to suppress its competitors' products.

Khan advocates viewing Amazon's platform as a common utility that all competitors can use without prejudice which would justify either spinning the online platform off as a separate company or closely regulating Amazon's fair use of its online platform so that there is no conflict of interest between Amazon the utility and Amazon the retailer. Amazon's vertical integration of its multiple lines of business has produced anticompetitive harm to Amazon's competition and to consumers, and the status quo cannot be maintained. Her preferred solution is to have Amazon broken up into separate companies so that Amazon can no longer leverage its online platform to dominate multiple product markets by means of anticompetitive practices such as favouring its own products over those of its business customers.

For a more recent account of Amazon as a dangerous monopolist, see Dana Mattioli's book, *The Everything War: Amazon's Ruthless Quest to Own the World and Remake Corporate Power* (2024). The book is a journalistic update on the state of business at Amazon vis à vis contemporary America's antitrust policy. Her writing draws significantly from Khan's paper as is indicated in the Prologue, which opens with this extended quote from 'Amazon's Antitrust Paradox:'

> Amazon is the titan of twenty-first century commerce. In addition to being a retailer, it is now a marketing platform, a delivery and logistics network, a payment service, a credit lender, an auction house, a major book publisher, a producer of television and films, a fashion designer, a hardware manufacturer, and a leading host of cloud server space. Although Amazon has clocked staggering growth, it generates meager profits, choosing to price below-cost and expand widely instead. Through this strategy, the company has positioned itself at the center of e-commerce and now serves as essential infrastructure for a host of other businesses that depend upon it. Elements of the firm's structure and conduct pose anticompetitive concerns—yet it has escaped antitrust scrutiny.

Mattioli's book is recommended as it is well-researched and updates Khan. Also, the narrative is accessible to a lay audience and is quite interesting given the cast of characters she weaves into her reporting.

Endnotes

(1) Lina Khan's article is available free and in its entirety and may be downloaded from *The Yale Law Journal* website at https://www.yalelawjournal.org/note/amazons-antitrust-paradox

(2) Curiously, Khan does not give much attention to Richard Posner, a leading jurist and scholar in the Chicago School's law and economics tradition. His textbook, *Antitrust Law: An Economic Perspective* (1976) is representative of the Chicago School of antitrust thought. The tension between the Chicago and structuralist schools comes down to the argument about economic efficiency (as determined by producer costs and consumer prices) and economic power (as determined by market concentration). Basically, the Chicago School is *laissez-faire*

with a primary focus on economic efficiency, while the structuralists are regulatory interventionists with their primary focus on curbing excess economic power. Posner disparages the populist tradition of antitrust, a tradition which would include the structuralist school. According to Posner, the objective of antitrust policy is to promote economic efficiency, and since collusion and monopolization are not necessarily economically inefficient, cartels and monopolies are not inherently bad. However, where collusion and monopolization are harmful, i.e., thought to contribute to economic inefficiency, they are valid targets of antitrust enforcement, but anticompetitive harm must be determined relative to economic efficiency not the structure of the market.

(3) For a comparison between U.S. antitrust and EU competition jurisprudence with respect to Microsoft in the early 2000s, see my essay, 'U.S. and European Union (EU) Antitrust: Convergence or Divergence in the Microsoft Case?' (2004) in my *Collected Essays on Political Economy and Wartime Civil Liberties, 2002-2008* published in 2020.

Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*, published in 1951, has received renewed interest in a world where there is a global conflict between competing ideologies. This time it is not communism versus capitalism, nor is it Christianity versus Islam. Instead it is between democratic and authoritarian forms of government. The centres of liberal democracy in Europe and North America are showing signs of severe strain, e.g., in Hungary, Israel, the United States and even the United Kingdom, France and Germany. Accompanying what, in the early part of the 21st century, has been a turning away from democratic institutions is a parallel shift towards ethnonationalism, which can be attributed to a nativist reaction to globalization and demographic changes.

Interest in George Orwell's *1984* has again been raised in the public consciousness, and now, Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* is being found increasingly relevant. Unlike *1984*, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is nonfiction. It is real and it is a sociopolitical history of significant movements in the late 19th century through the mid-20th century. In it, Arendt analyzes the nightmare that happened. Passages describing what really happened in the concentration and extermination camps are as viscerally disturbing as Holocaust documentaries. It is no longer fear of what could happen but a recounting of what actually did happen with an implicit warning that what has happened once is not inconceivable in our future.

What follows is a brief commentary—in which Arendt has generous speaking parts—on the third volume, 'Totalitarianism,' because it is this essay that speaks most directly to the present dangers of authoritarian movements. Here it is worth noting that Arendt does not equate the totalitarian regimes of Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union—the two targets of her essay—with ordinary dictatorships.

For Arendt, totalitarianism is an absolute state of unfreedom, characterized by total domination and destruction of the individual, i.e., of the undifferentiated masses who are not included in the totalitarian state's organization structure. Arendt writes that

> In totalitarian countries all places of detention ruled by the police are made to be veritable holes of oblivion into which people stumble by accident and without leaving behind them such ordinary traces, of former existence as a body and a grave. Compared with this newest invention for doing away with people, the old-fashioned method of murder, political or criminal, is inefficient indeed. The murderer leaves behind him a corpse, and although he tries to efface the traces of his own identity, he has no power to erase the identity of his victim from the memory of the surviving world. The operation of the secret police, on the contrary, miraculously sees to it that the victim never existed at all.

Not only to cease to exist among the living but to cease to exist among the dead—"the government eliminates them from the world of the living and exterminates their memory from the world of the dead." This is the absolute domination and destruction of the individual.

The organizational structure of totalitarianism resembles an onion with layers of protection for the innermost leaders. But in addition to defense, the outer layers serve as the means through which power is exercised from one layer to the next and ultimately to the masses who reside on the outside.

> The world at large, on the other side, usually gets its first glimpse of a totalitarian movement through its front organizations. The sympathizers, who are to all appearances still innocuous fellow-citizens in a nontotalitarian society, can

> hardly be called single-minded fanatics; through them, the movements make their fantastic lies more generally acceptable, can spread their propaganda in milder, more respectable forms, until the whole atmosphere is poisoned with totalitarian elements which are hardly recognizable as such but appear to be normal political reactions or opinions. The fellow-traveler organizations surround the totalitarian movements with a mist of normality and respectability that fools the membership about the true character of the outside world as much as it does the outside world about the true character of the movement. The front organization functions both ways: as the façade of the totalitarian movement to the nontotalitarian world, and as the façade of this world to the inner hierarchy of the movement.

Describing how the ranks of the onion's layers are 'chosen,' Arendt is hardly sanguine about the criteria for selection, promotion and continuance.

> Total domination does not allow for free initiative in any field of life, for any activity that is not entirely predictable. Totalitarianism in power invariably replaces all first-rate talents, regardless of their sympathies, with those crackpots and fools whose lack of intelligence and creativity is still the best guarantee of their loyalty.

The conciseness of this principle of hierarchical control gets repeated in the dissident writings of the East Bloc. For example, Rudolph Bahro in *The Alternative in Eastern Europe,* writes of East Germany that "Subservience to those above, severe discipline towards those below, and only in the third place competence—this is the prevailing order of selection criteria." In America, we speak of the "kiss up, kick down" business culture, which is as concise as one can put it.

But, Arendt writes, there is more. With respect to the use of propaganda to control the minds of those on the inside, there is the curious copresence of the gull and the cynic. At the innermost level, the mind is absolutely cynical but that extreme cynicism diminishes as one moves outwards from the centre. At the periphery where the front organizations meet the masses, there is near total acceptance of the propaganda—gullibility.

> The whole hierarchical structure of totalitarian movements, from naïve fellow-travelers to party members, elite formations, the intimate circle around the Leader, and the Leader himself, could be described in terms of a curiously varying mixture of gullibility and cynicism with which each member, depending upon his rank and standing in the movement, is expected to react to the changing lying statements of the leaders and the central unchanging ideological fiction of the movement.

Of course among the masses, the propaganda is ‘truth’ for they no longer know how to distinguish between truth and falsehood and so implicitly trust the voices of authority.

> The effectiveness of this kind of propaganda demonstrates one of the chief characteristics of modern masses. They do not believe in anything visible, in the reality of their own experience; they do not trust their eyes and ears but only their imaginations, which may be caught by anything that is at once universal and consistent in itself. What convinces masses are not facts, and not even invented facts, but only the consistency of the system of which they are presumably part. Repetition, somewhat overrated in importance because of the common belief in the masses’ inferior capacity to grasp and remember, is important only because it convinces them of consistency in time.

Through total domination, the leaders are confident in their psychological assessment of the masses—assured that their 'facts' will be accepted as 'truth' if repeated often enough and consistently. Completely dependent on the messaging from their leaders, the unfreedom of the masses is manifested in their unflinching consent. And as Arendt points out, "The arbitrary arrest which chooses among innocent people destroys the validity of free consent."

> In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world the masses had reached the point where they would, at the same time, believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and that nothing was true. The mixture in itself was remarkable enough, because it spelled the end of the illusion that gullibility was a weakness of unsuspecting primitive souls and cynicism the vice of superior and refined minds. Mass propaganda discovered that its audience was ready at all times to believe the worst, no matter how absurd, and did not particularly object to being deceived because it held every statement to be a lie anyhow. The totalitarian mass leaders based their propaganda on the correct psychological assumption that, under such conditions, one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism; instead of deserting the leaders who had lied to them, they would protest that they had known all along that the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness.

For Arendt, "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction . . . and the distinction between true and false . . . no longer exist."

* * *

While totalitarian methods have appeared in the actions of many autocracies, it is not inconceivable that another totalitarian state may one day emerge. In 2025, the question is whether America is capable of becoming the legatee of WWII Germany and 1930s Soviet Russia.

America’s history is not reassuring given America's enthusiasm for Manifest Destiny (and the means by which it was realized), its ongoing legacy of slavery and racial discrimination, its (ir)religious nationalism (despite its condemnation of Islamic nationalism as primitive) and its foreign policy exemptions from the very international norms it helped create after World War II.

The present regime in Washington, like its leader, is showing signs of recidivism. Manifest Destiny stretching to the top of the world. Racial unrest stirred up with a head-spinning about-face on policing in Black America. Christianity heralded by the most raucous and least empathetic. Foreign policy transacted as if by a criminal syndicate. Immigrants (and the immigrant-looking) dehumanized. And ordinary Americans turned into agents of government espionage.

So, is America capable of reaching the depths of depravity and brutality of Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s U.S.S.R. as described and analyzed by Arendt?

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<via email to Melanie.Joly@parl.gc.ca>

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March 13, 2025

Canada's Preparedness to Fend Off Economic and Political Pressures From an Antagonistic U.S. Administration

The Honourable Minister Mélanie Joly, P.C., M.P. M
Minister of Foreign Affairs
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

Dear Minister Joly:

The other day I read a piece by the CBC journalist, Evan Dyer, entitled 'The U.S. has covertly destabilized nations. With Canada, it's being done in public.' I agree with the sentiment that it is important for our governments (federal, provincial/territorial and municipal) to begin to think differently about our relationship with the U.S. While at this point, I can't imagine a direct military attack on Canada, I do believe that we could be watching the beginning of a long-term campaign to draw Canada much closer than most of us on this side of the border would like, i.e., a relationship that would compromise Canadian sovereignty. On its face, talk of annexation seems preposterous. It wouldn't be an easy thing to do, and there would be more political battles than America has to this point planned for. One joke runs thusly, 'If the U.S. annexes Canada, there won't be a Republican president for generations.'

The reason I'm writing is to introduce an article I read in *Foreign Affairs* today. In the article, the authors suggest how the U.S. can

assist Taiwan in preparing its 'gray-zone' defenses against aggressive Chinese behaviour. As I was reading it, the irony was too great to miss. This could be advice being given to Canada to prepare itself against U.S. threats, farfetched as this may sound given what has been one of the strongest bilateral alliances in the world.

It's highly unlikely that we'll see brigades of soldiers, tanks, aircraft and missiles heading our way. However, there are different ways to wage war, and President Trump has made that clear . . . and the history of U.S. foreign policy offers numerous examples. There appears to be no good reason why a long-standing ally of Canada should have declared this trade war on Canada in the first place. But one thing should be very clear: the U.S. government cannot enjoy the trust of Canadians and the Canadian government. This may not be a passing moment. More than 70 million Americans voted for Trump in the past two presidential elections. That's frightening. To much of the world, it seems a significant part of the U.S. electorate has gone insane, at least if we define political insanity as the willingness to sacrifice democratic norms in support of an autocratic agenda. We may be in a 'disturbed' relationship with the U.S. for some time.

What the article below points to are preventative measures that can be taken to ward off what the authors label gray-area attacks. Here's the opening paragraph which serves as a very brief abstract. Substitute 'Canada' for 'Taiwan' and 'U.S.' for 'China.'

> Although Taiwanese . . . defense planners are right to prepare for a Chinese invasion or blockade of Taiwan, the more immediate risk is that China would try to use gray-zone tactics, including sabotage and subversion, to destroy Taiwan’s will and power to resist. China might systematically sabotage water facilities, flood the island with propaganda, use cyberattacks to take down the elec-

> tric grid, orchestrate “accidental” disruptions of the Internet by cutting undersea fiber-optic cables, and provide aid to Taiwanese opposition figures and movements. Beijing’s short-term aim would be to wipe out, without firing a single shot, Taipei’s ability to mobilize the public against Chinese coercion and aggression. *

While I'm aware that I'm not sharing any expert or unique advice, I feel it's as important to share my views this way as it is to cast my single vote.

Regards,

Peter McMillan

*'How to Toughen Up Taiwan: America Must Help the Island Deal With China’s Gray-Zone Tactics, in *Foreign Affairs*, by Daniel Byman and Seth G. Jones, March 13, 2025.

In his short book, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* (2018), Robert Kagan, former editor-at-large for the *Washington Post*(1) and author of many books on international relations, argues that the rise of authoritarian governments and movements in countries around the world is largely attributable to America's growing disengagement from its role as the primary sponsor of the post-World War II liberal world order. Writing in 2018, Kagan clearly has in mind Xi Jinping's China, Putin's Russia, Kim Jong Un's North Korea, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's Iran, Orban's Hungary, Germany's AfD, France's National Rally, Italy's Brothers of Italy and most significantly, America's MAGA movement, which shocked the Western world with its victory in the 2016 presidential election that put Donald Trump, real estate developer and TV personality, in the White House. It is the latter that provided the real impetus for this book, as, for Kagan and many others in the American foreign policy establishment, the risks of the U.S. abdicating its role as 'leader of the free world' suddenly escalated. He writes, "If Obama's policies put a dent in the liberal world order, Trump's statements and actions are driving a stake through it."

While Kagan is truly alarmed for the immediate future of the liberal international order, one has to wonder whether at this point, nearly 75 years after they were established, the foundations of the post-World War II world had not been so firmly established as we thought. If Washington is the sole guarantor of this world order, which espouses limited government in the forms of representative democracy and free markets, then one must concede that the system is actually quite fragile. And Kagan agrees, noting that liberal democracies are by far and away the exception in the recorded history of governments, various forms of autocratic government having been historically the norm. What is one to make of Europe's, Ja-

pan's and the British Commonwealth's commitment to the program if the system would collapse without the U.S. as its underwriter?

Kagan's thesis is encapsulated in the book's title. The jungle evokes the Hobbesian world of 'all against all,' which in 17th century England had to be tamed by the authoritarian Leviathan. Now, for Kagan, Hobbes' Leviathan is as much a part of the jungle as the rest. It is only the Enlightenment ideas of freedom that can save human society from the violent and unpredictable world of the jungle. The liberal international world order is the human society of nations that have escaped the jungle, but this escape can never be permanent as the jungle cannot be completely destroyed and it grows back again and again despite efforts to contain it and push it back.

> Pushing the jungle back from the garden is a never-ending task. There are no "mission accomplished" moments. Liberalism, prosperity, stability are constantly being eroded or undermined by enduring forces of habit and history and by enduring elements of human nature. Policies and policy formulations inevitably fell victim to the foibles common to all humans, no matter how well intentioned—the failures of insight and foresight, the selfishness and solipsism, and the overall incompetence endemic to all human activity.

What exactly does the jungle represent? Essentially, it is that part of human nature that, owing to fear and insecurity on one hand and greed and the lust for power on the other, seeks to dominate instead of cooperate and congregate in small tribes where the enemy is everything outside the tribe.

Kagan is not so disingenuous as to deny the hypocrisy of U.S. exceptionalism in foreign policy in the post-World War II global system. However, he attempts to justify what has sometimes been

characterized as *Pax Americana* as the best option among imperfect choices. The overarching purpose of the liberal world order is to prevent the sort of breakdowns in international affairs that led to the unspeakable slaughter of the two world wars of the 20th century. America's violation of the sovereignty of countries around the world is noted, but it is regarded as collateral damage.

> Americans were certainly unready for the moral complexity of wielding such great power. They never reconciled themselves to the tragic reality that it was impossible to wield power, even in the best of causes, with clean hands. Americans liked to believe they were on the side of the good, but power is power and killing is killing, no matter how virtuous the objective. In every war, innocents are killed, dreadful mistakes waste the lives of brave soldiers, and even disciplined armies commit atrocities.

The obvious contradictions between the espoused democratic liberalism and its practice in everyday international affairs are said to be resolved according to the principle of the greatest good or least harm. This, of course, assumes that there is an inescapable trade-off between great power conflicts and great power interventions (economic and military) in small countries.

Kagan argues that it was a multipolar world that led to the two world wars, which he cites to support his view that the US-led international order has performed well in terms of keeping the great powers from engaging one another in full-scale war and threatening to draw in the rest of the world. Here, Kagan has to justify America's use of military and economic force in the countries of the Third World (now the Global South). He writes, "it is ultimately the American security guarantee, the ability to deploy hard power to deter and defeat potential aggressors, that provides the essential foundation without which the liberal world order could never survive." In his view, what

progressive critics call neocolonialism is a necessary evil for containing smaller conflicts and is part of a larger foreign policy of containment that was designed to outlast the Soviet Union. Now that the Cold War between the U.S. and the USSR is over, the enemies of the liberal world order are a miscellany of aggressive autocracies as mentioned above.

Throughout the book, Kagan describes international relations as if it were a complex strategy game where the key players are the great powers. Countries in the Global South are to be played. In the trade-offs of global diplomacy, citizens of the former are regarded more highly than those of the latter. This has its parallel in the domestic politics of the US. Ronald Reagan acquired notoriety for trickle-down economics, but he was not the first nor the last Republican to serve the wealthy at the expense of the poor. That is fundamental to the Republican platform—on one side, tax cuts for the rich, subsidies for American corporations, and tax loopholes for both, while on the other side, welfare cutbacks for the poor. In the international system led by the US, the great powers are the rich, and the countries of the Global South are the poor.

To his credit, Kagan does raise the alarm of the dangers posed by Trump and his movement . . . and this was in 2018. “Doubts about America have reverberated across the globe, especially since the election of Trump, and this alone has contributed to the unraveling of the liberal order.” Fast forward seven years, and the dangers have been magnified and transformed into attacks, and the attack on the global world order is underway. Picking up on Kagan’s metaphor, the jungle is no longer being actively pushed back—certainly not by America. And if America is not willing to contain it, who will? That is the danger of an international system that relies so much on one country. What happens when that country is compromised and can no longer be relied upon to support democracy and free markets worldwide?

All is not lost though, as Kagan counters, “It is no more accurate to say today that the West is facing inevitable decline than it was to say in 1989 that history had ended and liberalism had triumphed.” Here, he refers to Francis Fukuyama’s (in)famous End of History thesis, which hearkens back to Hegelian notions of the dialectic of history. Kagan reminds us that just as Fukuyama’s assessment was misguided, our current assessment of the state of the world may be flawed. To put it another way, what may appear inevitable today need not lead us to a feckless fatalism.

One does not have to agree entirely with all of Kagan’s political views to appreciate his contribution to America’s resistance, such as it is, to the transactional conduct of foreign policy by an administration that is not so much driven by ideology as by the motives of a Republican crime syndicate godfathered by a deranged old man.

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Endnotes

(1) Kagan resigned from the *Post* when Jeff Bezos, the paper’s owner, pulled the endorsement of Kamala Harris, the 2024 Democratic presidential candidate, breaking with recent *Post* practice. Kagan cited a *quid pro quo* between Bezos and Trump, which would assure Bezos’ Blue Origin, a rival of Elon Musk’s SpaceX, of favourable treatment under a Trump Administration. See the October 27, 2024 *New York Times* article, ‘Bezos faces criticism after executives met with Trump on day of Post’s non-endorsement.’

The Lumumba Plot: The Secret History of the CIA and Cold War Assassination (2023) by Stuart A. Reid, senior editor at *Foreign Affairs,* a publication of the Council of Foreign Relations an influential foreign policy centre in the U.S., retells the story of Patrice Lumumba's rise to power and his having suddenly been murdered not long after the Congo declared independence from Belgium. Reid attributes the belated publication to the dearth of preserved Congolese documents from the period and U.S. delays in declassifying its own documents, in particular those detailing the CIA's covert operations against Lumumba. It is at this point that Reid asserts that "Democracies are defined by openness, accountability, and free inquiry," and asks rhetorically, "More than six decades after Patrice Lumumba's murder, what could possibly be worth hiding, and from whom?"

If the reader expects a case closed investigative report, they will be disappointed. However, a reader curious about certain dark chapters of American interference in the sovereign affairs of other countries will find compelling evidence of American hypocrisy. On the one hand, America, as the leader of the free world, proclaims itself the champion democratic governance. On the other, the means by which the U.S. has promoted democracy has often compromised the entire project. All countries prioritize their own national interests. That is the nature of international politics. Yet, Reid maintains that where U.S. foreign policy has failed, as he claims it did in the Congo, the black boxes must be opened up and studied. The obvious, albeit unstated premise, is that we can do better than this.

In 1960, 17 newly-independent African countries joined the United Nations, beginning a decisive change in the demographic makeup of the General Assembly. Some 75 years after European leaders met in Berlin to carve up the African continent into European colo-

nies. The Congo was Belgium's loss, but Congolese independence did not come easily, and the period from 1960-1961 was a torturous separation. From 1958, the Congolese independence movement was led by the young, articulate and tenacious nationalist, Patrice Lumumba. By 1959 the Belgium King was announcing the end of the Belgian Congo.

> The object of our presence in the Dark Continent was thus defined by Leopold II: to open these backward countries to European civilization, to call their peoples to emancipation, liberty, and progress, after having saved them from slavery, disease, and poverty. In continuance of these noble aims, our firm resolve today is to lead, without fatal evasions but without imprudent haste, the Congolese peoples to independence in prosperity and peace. (1)

Independence came suddenly and quickly—too much so as there was no transition. The Congolese had not been educated and trained in public administration and when the Belgians fled en masse, great gaping holes in the government were haphazardly filled. The Congolese had the desire to be free but not the preparation for self-governance and so much turmoil ensued only to be managed by means of dictatorship. This was a script that played out across many of the former European colonies in the Third World, which we now know, with the demise of the U.S.S.R. and its East European satellite countries, as the Global South. From mercantilist exploitation and political tutelage, the Congo emerged ill-equipped to create a new country. It was impossible to graft Western ideals of democratic governance and economic freedom onto the old Belgian colonial model. The institutions created by Brussels were never intended to be transferable to an independent African-run state. Corruption, violence and poverty were the predictable consequences of irresponsible colonial rule notwithstanding King Baudouin's high-sounding words that Belgium had from the start

been committed to its African colony's "emancipation, liberty, and progress." Much of the world had not forgotten Belgium's record of atrocities committed by the Force Publique (severed hands being a trademark demonstration of absolute rule) and its abject failure and lack of interest in protecting its colonial charges from the ravages of poverty, famine and disease.

Is it any wonder then that the words of Lumumba spoken across the Congo and recorded in letters created a frenzy of hope? In a letter smuggled out of prison shortly before his murder, Lumumba wrote,

> They have corrupted some of our countrymen; they have bought others; they have done their part to distort the truth and defile our independence. What else can I say? That whether dead or alive, free or in prison by order of the colonialists, it is not my person that is important. What is important is the Congo, our poor people whose independence has been turned into a cage, with people looking at us from outside the bars, sometimes with charitable compassion, sometimes with glee and delight. But my faith will remain unshakable. I know and feel in my heart of hearts that sooner or later my people will rid themselves of all their enemies, foreign and domestic, that they will rise up as one to say no to the shame and degradation of colonialism and regain their dignity in the pure light of day.
>
> We are not alone. Africa, Asia, and the free and liberated peoples in every corner of the globe will ever remain at the side of the millions of Congolese who will not abandon the struggle until the day when there will be no more colonizers and no more of their mercenaries in our country. I want my children, whom I leave behind and perhaps will never see again, to be told that the future of the Congo is beautiful and that their country expects them, as it expects every Congolese, to fulfill the sacred task of rebuilding our inde-

> pendence, our sovereignty; for without justice there is no dignity and without independence there are no free men.

While the foregoing presents Lumumba in a favourable light, Reid is not sparing of the criticism leveled against the Congo's first prime minister, mostly coming from Belgian and American officials. That criticism itself requires some perspective as well: Belgium was keen to retain control of the vast mineral wealth in the Congo, having pretty well exhausted the Congo's ivory and rubber potential. This was especially the case in the mineral-rich southern province of Katanga, which early on threatened secession from the Congo with considerable encouragement from Belgian interests. For the U.S., it was the domino theory in Africa (the domino theory was already in play in Vietnam). If one country succumbs to the temptations of Soviet communism, then all the rest will follow in a chain reaction.

America's Cold War obsession with the spread of communism was by no means limited to Africa and Asia. It was global in reach and included South and Central America as well. Recall that President Reagan waged a covert war against the Sandinista Government in Nicaragua, which the International Court of Justice in 1986 judged to be a violation of international law. The U.S. ignored the ruling on the principle that it had the unilateral right (based on relative political, military and economic power) to intervene as it deemed necessary in the affairs of the Western Hemisphere as it had done many times before in Nicaragua and other Latin American countries. U.S. exceptionalism in this part of the world was not a new phenomenon. It is a longstanding claim to supra-sovereignty that dates back to the Monroe Doctrine of 1820 when America was a much younger and much weaker nation.

Reid's characterizations of the players in the drama surrounding independence and the plot to kill Lumumba do not appear to be unjustly biased against Belgium or the U.S. The basis for his critique

of Belgian and American meddling in Congolese affairs has substantial historical support. Nor does Reid's portrayal of the Africans seem naïvely idealistic. Descriptions of Lumumba's character, behaviour and actions prevent Reid from being blinded by the man's charisma and phoenix-like indestructibility. A side-by-side comparison of how Reid portrays Lumumba and Joseph Mobutu (who later adopted the African name, Mobutu Sese Seko), an early ally and late-stage enemy, leaves this reader with the impression that he (Reid) would not have gambled that Lumumba would have turned out much different from the kleptocratic dictator Mobutu became during his 32-year presidential reign of the Congo (as the Democratic Republic of the Congo from 1965-1971 and Zaire from 1971-1997). The assassination of Lumumba reads like a Greek tragedy, in part personal but certainly for the nation.

To America's credit, in 1975, the U.S. Senate established a committee headed by Senator Frank Church (Dem. Idaho) to investigate the nation's intelligence community. This was during a period of American reckoning with the Executive Branch gone rogue as evidenced by the conduct of the war in Vietnam and the Watergate Scandal.

> [T]he committee's first report covered only the CIA's assassination efforts, which Senator Church believed would best capture the public's imagination. On the morning of November 20, 1975, copies of the 349-page document, Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders, landed on the desks of all U.S. senators. After a last-minute attempt by Republicans to block its release to the public—a futile effort, since many of the findings had already appeared in newspapers over the previous months….
>
> The revelations were explosive. Though the CIA had been unsuccessful in getting to Lumumba itself, its efforts in the Congo had turned into something of a blueprint for

> subsequent covert interventions in which assassinating political targets was no longer beyond the pale. . . . [T]he details about the Lumumba plot were in many ways the most damning. Of the five cases studied, this was the only one in which the investigators could more or less prove that the initiative had come not from the CIA or local partners in the field but from the White House.

Today's reader may wonder whether America will one day have another profound reckoning.

Some may read *The Lumumba Plot* as a wokeist guilt-trip masquerading as history, but that may be just a reflexive response to uncomfortable facts. But for others the business of history is not as settled and immutable as we may have been given to believe when we were in school or even in college. For those, this book is a valuable source of information, and it need not be authoritative in all respects in order to maintain its worth. Insofar as it facilitates our introspection as a nation to consider our past not with flag-waving numbness on the one hand or irrepressible shame on the other but as the record of our fallibility and a basis for moving forward. It comes down to what kind of country (society) we want to have made.

Finally, for aficionados of fictional spy thrillers, *The Lumumba Plot* can also be enjoyed as a nonfiction spy thriller filled with intrigue, suspense, and twists and turns aplenty.

Endnotes

(1) There is memorable quote from Léo Pétillon, the Governor-General of the Belgian Congo from 1952–58 regarding the consequences of Belgium decolonizing the Congo: “The jungle will close in. It will take over what we have wrested from it.” This nicely sums up what was wrong with Belgium’s ‘stewardship’ of the Congo. Unfortunately and unwisely, Robert Kagan trots out the same metaphor in his 2018 book, *The Jungle Grows Back,* in order to illustrate the 21st century’s turn away from liberal democratic governance to authoritarian regimes. It is unfair, because the European colonial experience was arguably a grand failure if judged against the objectives stated by King Baudouin. It is unwise, because the very hint that liberal democracies can be compared to Belgian rule in the Congo suggests that liberal democracies are fundamentally exploitative, violent and irresponsible.

Robert Kagan's latest book, *Rebellion: How Antiliberalism is Tearing American Apart—Again* (2024), challenges the notion that what he has called Trump's fascism(1) came from nowhere. In *Rebellion*, the neoconservative foreign policy theorist, argues that the Trump phenomenon has a long and unsavoury history in the U.S. The white christian(2) nationalism that has coalesced around Trump is the latest and perhaps most dangerous threat to democracy in American history. Yet, Kagan makes a strong yet controversial case that America has from the beginning nurtured antiliberalism in the forms of white supremacy and christian supremacy. These antiliberal views are contrary to the egalitarian principle in the Declaration of Independence and to the liberal principle of limited (or constitutional) government.

Kagan believes that the egalitarianism enunciated in the Declaration is neither dependent on God nor man, i.e., divine law or man-made law. Instead, it owes its origin and authority to natural law which is knowable as it is 'self-evident' and 'inalienable.' As a conservative and as an American, Kagan would never extend equality to the economic sphere of human activity nor would he countenance a version of egalitarianism such as direct democracy. The Bill of Rights would best exemplify those freedoms which, for him, guarantee equality before the law.

In *Rebellion*, Kagan focuses on domestic politics, but it might be worth keeping in mind that as a neocon (think of the George W. Bush administrations), the liberalism that he advocates in domestic affairs does not apply to foreign affairs. American exceptionalism in international relations is not addressed in this book, and if it were it would complicate the message. For, Kagan's views of America's role in the world smacks of a hubris and arrogance that he would deny non-American actors on the international national scene. That

position is tenable because America is still a great power capable of acting unilaterally and there is no international counterpart to the nation-state to rein in rulebreakers. There is no international government capable of enforcing its laws, and the U.S. has made this clear over and over in its disagreements with the judgments of international organizations. The U.N. functions where countries agree to follow the law. In the case of the permanent Security Council members—the descendant states of the victors of World War II—each member possesses an absolute veto of U.N. resolutions.

Ordinarily, Kagan is principally focused on international politics. However, the arrival of Trump on the American political scene in the 2010s shook the democratic foundations of the American metropole. And metropole would be the appropriate term for the sort of interventionist foreign policy that neocons are noted for. Think back to the two American wars in west and central Asia waged in response to the Al-Qaeda attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001. Both were far more than retaliation. America's most recent Asian wars were intended to depose regimes and set about the grand task of nation building à la the post-World War II rebuilding of Germany and Japan. Regime decapitation was successful, but the far more ambitious project of creating liberal democratic governments has failed dismally, no better image of which was the *déjà vu* moment when U.S. helicopters swooped in to rescue desperate Americans in Kabul as they had in Saigon nearly half a century earlier.

Kagan believes that America will overcome this latest challenge from antiliberalism, and in so doing, he effectively dials down the urgency.

> [T]he overall long-term prospects for American liberalism are actually bright, if only because the demographic shift is a reality that can't be blinked away. White supremacy is

> another Lost Cause. As America becomes increasingly multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural, and as it becomes impossible for any single ethnoreligious group to dominate American politics and society, the appeal of liberalism as the only means of holding such a society together should grow. Many white people may not change their attitudes toward other racial and ethnic groups—after all, they haven't changed in two hundred years—but their ability to fight to preserve their hierarchies will diminish because they will be too badly outnumbered.

Yet, just a few sentences later, Kagan quite dramatically changes course from an evolutionary path back to liberalism to one that requires citizen activism. He acknowledges that America may never be completely rid of white supremacy or christian supremacy, though he believes demographic changes will take care of that. This is the threat that white christian nationalists in America and around the world obsess about. It is their fear and anger that drives their anti-immigrant politics. For Kagan, "The 1924 immigration legislation explicitly called for preserving the 'racial preponderance' of 'the basic strain of our population,'" adding that "The *Los Angeles Times* headline read 'Nordic Victory Is Seen in Drastic Restrictions'" to illustrate the spirit of the times. In his view, "the 1920s were a high-water mark of antiliberalism, the highest until now."

In the following quote, Kagan suggests that there may well be an alternative to the long-run return of pluralism resulting from demographic realignment—one that requires citizen activism about which he declines to elaborate.

> Americans who believe in the liberalism of the Revolution and the founding will have to fight for it, again. If they do not, whether out of complacency or indifference, American liberal government, and the freedoms it provides us all, will be no more.

Quite unexpectedly, he lets the Democrats off the hook, “If American democracy explodes in this 2024 election year, it will be because Republican voters let it happen.” There is no doubt that the Republican Party and those who voted for Republicans have betrayed the egalitarian and progressive ideals of American democracy. For Republicans who routinely take refuge in whataboutism (“When we do ‘these things’ you cry foul, but you do them, too, so who are you to judge?”) The following words from Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism* ring loud and true on over-relativizing and refusing to distinguish between the real and the fake, the true and the untrue, the good and the bad:

> The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.

Nevertheless, the Democratic Party shares blame. Kagan fails to point out that the Democratic Party is supposed to be an opposition party when a Republican is in the White House. Clearly it is not. The responsibility of the Opposition in America’s two-party system is to be a critical check on the excesses of the governing party, and as of the writing of this review, at no time in recent history has the role of the Opposition been so consequential. Both parties are failing American democracy. The Republican Party is ushering in a fascist state, while the Democratic Party is not pushing back nearly as vigorously as the Republicans are pushing ahead. This is an egregiously missed opportunity for Kagan to light a fire under the Democratic Party.

In ignoring the secular rise of economic inequality in America, he misses a second opportunity. By failing to factor in the threat of plutocracy and kleptocracy to democracy in America, he is effectively

denying or at least downplaying its significance in contributing to the intense antiliberal sentiments of MAGA supporters, who he grants feel disenfranchised. It would not be difficult to logically connect the vanishing American Dream and the gross distortions of income and wealth accumulation with the rise of mass fear and anger at targets—especially the non-white and non-christian—who are within easy reach.

Kagan, himself, had had enough of the backroom deals when he resigned as editor-at-large from the *Washington Post*. This despite Kagan being no stranger to the all too frequent intrusion of big money in American politics. In an interview with the *Daily Beast*, Kagan asserted that there was a *quid pro quo* meeting between Trump and Blue Origins executives after the *Washington Post* killed its pre-election editorial endorsement of the Democratic Party candidate, Kamala Harris.

In January 2025, the *Washington Post* blocked publication of an editorial cartoon by Ann Telnaes which depicted "Mark Zuckerberg / Facebook & Meta founder and CEO, Sam Altman/AI CEO, Patrick Soon-Shiong/ LA Times publisher, the Walt DisneyCompany/ABC News, and Jeff Bezos / Washington Post owner." Telnaes quit in protest of what she deemed to be censorship.

This is the cartoon that never made it to print.

Ann Telnaes (rough of cartoon killed)

Finally, Kagan could have developed the argument that democracies are by nature more fragile than antiliberal governments, as many others have done. The historical record, being all we have to go on, clearly demonstrates that democracies have existed for a fraction of human history. With respect to the frequency and durability of antiliberal governments, Kagan could have added the evidence that it took a cataclysmic world war to undo the antiliberal regimes in Germany, Italy and Japan.

Despite these shortcomings, Kagan's book is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature warning against imminent dictatorship in America. It is worthy of consideration in particular because it illustrates how vulnerable America has been to the cultural pull of race and religion. That what we see happening in America has happened before should make us more alert and vigilant to the ever present dangers that threaten our democratic form of government—imperfect as it is—which we often take for granted.

The supreme irony for neocons is that while dictatorship for America is unacceptable, a unipolar world where America is the sole hyperpower is just fine. And so, America can champion the democratic freedoms of its own citizens, at least on paper, while denying that other countries have a self-evident and inalienable right to govern their citizens. In this view, some countries are just too backwards, corrupt or fractured by internecine conflict that it is inconceivable that they be considered candidates for self-governance, democracy and the rule of law. Better that a greater power (or Great Power) guide them and dole out the appropriate amounts of sovereignty at the appropriate time.

Endnotes

(1) See Kagan's May 18, 2016 op-ed entitled 'This is how fascism comes to America' in the *Washington Post*. The opinion piece was re-printed on the Brookings Institution's website on May 22, 2016 and is available without a subscription.
(2) Small 'c' christianity refers to the cultural as opposed to the spiritual attachment that so many seem to have with Christianity.

The Unaccountability Machine: Why Big Systems Make Terrible Decisions—and How the World Lost Its Mind by Dan Davies was published in spring 2024, i.e., before the presidential election that returned Trump to the White House. This is significant because the book would not have been so appropriately timed had Kamala Harris won the election. This is made clear as Davies develops a cybernetic explanation for the autocratic turn of the early 21st century, now including the U.S.

In the opening pages, Davies shares this brief synopsis of a sometimes complicated text—difficult for those of us who are not formally acquainted with the systems theory of cybernetics.

> This is a book about the industrialisation of decision-making – the methods by which, over the last century, the developed world has arranged its society and economy so that important institutions are run by processes and systems, operating on standardised sets of information, rather than by individual human beings reacting to individual circumstances. This has led to a fundamental change in the relationship between decision makers and those affected by their decisions, the vast population of what might be called 'the decided-upon'. That relationship used to be what we called 'accountability', and this book is about the ways in which accountability has atrophied.

For Davies, the 2008 global financial crisis was a catastrophic system failure that can be attributed to the unaccountability machine. No one person was responsible for the meltdown. It just happened. But it 'just' happened because the 'machine'—the subsystems of policies, rules and processes constituting the global financial system—were allowed to run amok and without the discretionary corrections that could have been implemented had the proper

feedback loops been in place and operational. However, without proper system feedback mechanisms in place to compel corrective actions, what former Federal Reserve Chairman, Alan Greenspan, termed ‘irrational exuberance’ proceeded apace until the financial system was glutted with bad debt and could engorge no more. It finally exploded. The so-called Great Moderation of low inflation and sustained economic growth ended in a collapse of confidence and a dramatic downturn in the familiar pattern of capitalism’s business cycle of boom and bust. That it had been allowed to happen with so many financial and economic experts watching illustrates what Davies means by an ‘accountability sink’ where the system is left to work itself out as if by the magic of an infallibly functioning machine and no one is held liable for disasters.

For Davies, the bottom line is that there was no higher order system capable and responsible for making sure the machine could curb the runaway ‘irrational exuberance’ of the market for accelerating high-risk debt, i.e., below prime adjustable rate mortgages that were repackaged (securitized) multiple times at higher rates of return. For that, the institutions of government finance, central banks and commercial banks should bear responsibility notwithstanding cybernetic excuses. Despite their reckless and frenzied buying and selling of repackaged debt, financial institutions were rewarded with bailouts. Meanwhile, the heaviest punishment fell on those who lost their jobs and income in the recession and were pinched further by government austerity programs.

Davies points to three accountability sinks that exacerbated the suffering of those hit hardest by the financial crisis: inflation targeting by central banks, the European Union’s (EU) Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) and the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) structural adjustment programs for countries hit hardest by the financial crisis. All three were developed as systems capable of functioning independent of the ‘whimsical’ discretionary interventions emanating

from the political system. Nearly four decades earlier, the inflation target of two percent had been introduced to restrict discretionary countercyclical fiscal policy (increased government spending) and monetary policy (lower interest rates) that politicians routinely propose during periods of rising or high unemployment. The central bank policy of inflation targeting shifted significant economic authority away from elected officials to unelected financial and economic experts. Inflation targeting functions as an accountability sink insofar as central banks adhere very closely to the two percent target regardless of unemployment numbers in the job market. Experts are governed by the system's non-discretionary rules and processes, and politicians are likewise constrained. Naturally, this raises accountability concerns and doubts about responsible government.

The same is the case for the deficit and debt limits that the SGP sets for EU member states that use the euro currency. Under the SGP, annual budget deficits must be kept below three percent of GDP, and national debt must be maintained below 60 percent of GDP. Eurozone member states effectively cede part of their sovereignty over their respective national economies, and this becomes especially problematic during periods of high unemployment and severe reductions in government services. Germany and France, being the dominant economies in the EU, have enjoyed some latitude, but this does not sit well with the rest of the union. Just as the regime of inflation targeting sets constraints on the ability of democratically-elected officials to respond to hard times, so the SGP proscribes member states' independent exercise of national economic policy. This gives rise to issues of accountability and sovereignty.

Much the same applies to the IMF's structural loan programs. Monies for financially desperate countries come with strings attached. These strings, or conditions, compel borrower countries to comply with fiscal and monetary policy directions coming from Washington,

the headquarters of the IMF. More often than not, government austerity is the 'condition.' This translates into hardships for the general population in the form of lost jobs, reduced incomes and scaled back government programs. Again, as with inflation targeting and the SGP, an accountability sink is created, such that no one in particular can be blamed, because it is the system of non-discretionary rules that makes the decisions. Thus is created a democratic deficit, the more common term used to characterize the failure of democratic institutions to govern on behalf of the people.

The imposition of these unaccountability machines is not presented as such in press releases and media analyses. Rather, there are tried and true rationalizations for why governments cannot and should not be more responsive to economic hardships. One of the most important is the dogma that the market knows best, performs best and achieves optimal outcomes when government is hands off (*laissez-faire*). Davies writes,

> 'Market outcomes' are a huge accountability sink, but there's also a philosophical blind spot. Policymakers and their advisors have internalised the belief that the market is a greater intelligence than anything humanity can offer. The combination of political convenience and intellectual rationalisation is a powerful one; when a possible market solution presents itself, it has a huge advantage in consideration against alternatives, whether or not it deserves one.

Davies also draws on the economic philosophy of Milton Friedman, the champion of the free market and critic of government intervention. According to Davies,

> The thread running through the ideological shifts associated with Friedmanism – the neoliberal revolution in public policy and the post-1970 turn in managerialism – is that of

> a deep, almost nihilistic lack of trust in human judgement. If fallible people were put in charge of something, they would generally be lazy, careless or dishonest; the only way to make it otherwise was to harness their selfishness, making sure that they were personally bearing the costs and gaining the benefits. The market transaction was important to Friedman because it was the only human relationship that you could be sure was honest.

Government intrusions in the market that benefit the private sector such as favourable tax treatment, free use of government R&D, grants and subsidies, government contracts as well as the rarely mentioned social investment of government in education, telecommunications and transportation infrastructure, and the rule of law meet with little to no pushback from *laissez-faire* economists and the business community.(1)

Davies likens such a market to an ever-present, all-knowing and all-powerful artificial intelligence. He then illustrates how effectively the illusion can be created. Thus,

> [F]inancial markets do give answers to these questions [of resource allocation to future production], thousands of times a day, in a way that can seem miraculous. When you look at the capital market in this way, you might be briefly overwhelmed, to the extent that you wonder whether it might be a magical computing fabric after all. It's an extraordinary thing; walking across a trading floor is a tangible experience of what it might be like to live inside an artificial intelligence. This sense of getting out more than you put in certainly helped the Friedman doctrine to gain acceptance; as well as being a wonderful accountability sink, 'the markets' do feel like they might be better decision makers than any individual human being, or any small group of people that you might be able to gather together in a boardroom.

But there are problems with excessive deference to the market. Those playing the markets speculate (or gamble with uncertainty) and make a fortune when they're right. And when they are wrong, they are often protected by investor-friendly tax laws—approved by legislators and presidents/prime ministers—that mitigate their losses. The incentives are intended to promote old-fashioned rent-seeking (i.e., passive profit seeking) behaviour, but they also generate moral hazard, which is something that clients of the IMF in the Global South routinely get chastised for. The real losers are those who lose their homes when a housing bubble bursts, who lose employment income when the business contraction sets in and who are adversely by government austerity measures, especially those that negatively impact unemployment insurance, worker pension plans and government assistance to the lowest socioeconomic percentiles.

This disproportionate and perverse allocation of rewards and punishments creates fertile ground for populist demagogues who loudly proclaim themselves to be the only ones listening to the marginalized and dispossessed. Those who are crying for help may look to any quarter, as they believe the Establishment has failed and then abandoned them. Cybernetically speaking, the Establishment failed to build in the higher order systems that control the outcomes of the complex network of economic and governance systems. And, as long as no communication channel for incorporating system feedback exists, when things are going off the rails, proactive intervention is unlikely and corrective action is delayed until the system has broken down, as in 2008.

The consequence is what the world experienced in the first decade of the 21st century. It all came apart. Suddenly, the tap was turned off. The business cycle was back. Chairman Greenspan had not

tamed it after all. In fact, in some post mortems, it was argued that he greatly assisted in perpetuating the myth.

> For fifty years, the free market played that role; the underlying guarantee was that all decisions would get taken care of, even if nobody made them. When that fell apart, the ultimate basis of the system . . . sounded the alarm. Ever since then, we've been looking for a new organising principle.

And this is where Davies connects the accountability sinks to the rise of the autocrats.

> I think this is what explains the common thread between MAGA, Brexit, the Five Star Movement, Hindutva and all the rest. The populist movements of the 2010s all promised a simpler world; they were . . . taking on the great anxiety of their people and addressing it. They were also promising to restore the broken communication channels – to make voices heard.

The populists who emerged in the 2010s were a phenomenon directly attributable to the unaccountability machine finally having been fully exposed by the 2008 financial crisis.

> Narendra Modi in India, Beppe Grillo in Italy, Donald Trump in America, Nigel Farage in Britain or Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey instinctively realised that they were on the same side; each of them, in their own culturally specific context, was acting as a communication channel for a population which wanted to convey a single bit of information: the message that translates as, 'Help! the Current State of Affairs is Intolerable to me.'

That leaves the question about just what can be done now. Davies is much briefer in his prescription than in his analysis.

> Management cybernetics doesn't give any clues as to how such a profound social change might be achieved, unfortunately. . . . My only guess is that it might be that what's really intolerable about unaccountability is the broken feedback link, and that if we can solve the problem of communicating with the system – pay more attention to the 'red-handle alert' mechanisms that indicate an unbearable outcome – people might not be so furious about the death of personal responsibility. In general, people in my experience are a lot less angry about everything when they feel like they're being listened to.

Perhaps his next book will be more prescriptive. Granted the kinds of changes required to fix the problems of a badly designed and failing system will not be easy or simple. So, there is good reason to start with the identification and assessment of system failure in order to foster a more vocal public demand for accountability, which if persistently loud and visible may engender more sincere and committed efforts to fix the system. But, MAY is the operative word.

Endnotes

(1) The following satirical view of the great Inflation-Unemployment Tradeoff debate is from my short fiction, 'Milt, Mo and the Money Machine,' and is included in my *Anthology of Hardly 20/20 Flash! Fiction*.

> Today . . . the world is filled with hybrid knob twiddler-auto pilots who run the money machines the world over. They are highly educated, well intentioned, removed from the distractions of fractious politics, and capable of judiciously

balancing multiple conflicting interests. They understand the limits of (others') human knowledge. They understand the weakness of (others') human nature. They promote the superiority of (their) expertise in resolving public policy disputes. They profess scientific objectivity in pursuit of good governance. They proclaim the practical imperative that the good of the many exceeds the sacrifice of the few. Finally, they bring order and predictability, as governors of the money machines, into a world otherwise characterized by conflict and uncertainty.

In this 2025 collaboration between Ezra Klein (*New York Times*) and Derek Thomson (*The Atlantic*), the liberal Left has hit on a compromise with the pro-business Right. The authors concur that for too long liberals (in the U.S., liberals are positioned on the left side of the political spectrum) have had commendable ideals, but they have also created their own roadblocks that often prevent those ideals from being transformed into productive outcomes. In *Abundance*, the authors attempt to show their fellow liberals where it all went wrong. This is, therefore, not a critique of the creeping authoritarianism in America, but rather a self-examination of where the liberal alternative has failed to be a viable competitor in the national debate. They begin with the housing problems in America, where the American dream of home ownership has become increasingly elusive, the euphoric subprime solution blew up and ended the dream for many, and the American nightmare of homelessness has become a commonplace symbol of the collapse of social justice in American politics.

In the concluding chapter, the authors recap the purpose of their book—to provoke a critical evaluation of the Left's often misguided emphasis on process at the expense of delivering results. They believe the problems associated with population growth and the economy's inability to keep pace require answering and acting on difficult, yet very basic questions:

> If there are not enough homes, can we make more? If not, why not? If there is not enough clean energy, can we make more? If not, why not? If the government is repeatedly failing to complete major projects on time and on budget, then what is going wrong and how do we fix it? If the rate of scientific progress is slowing, how can we help scientists do their best work? If we need new technologies to solve our

> important problems, how do we pull these inventions from the future and distribute them in the present?

The chapters sketching out their proposal are simply labeled: Build, Govern, Invent and Deploy. Build more homes so that people can live in cities, find employment, raise families and build communities where face-to-face interpersonal and professional life can restore the synergy of people living and working together instead of relying on the technologies of communication from a distance. The chief obstacle: the excess of laws and rules that have grown up like weeds choking the building supply. The key word is ‘excess’ and, in their view, the greatest offender is the body of zoning ordinances established at the municipal level, not the state or federal level. Their most contentious argument is that those who espouse liberalism in national and state-level politics often express conservative views when it comes to who and what to allow into their neighbourhoods. Maybe there are legitimate environmental, public safety, infrastructure and congestion issues associated with building high-rise apartment buildings in communities zoned for single-family dwellings, but the real, and often unstated, objection to affordable housing is that ‘we’ don’t want those people in our neighbourhood and certainly not in those numbers. And the objection to building a power plant in the neighbourhood, for example, is much the same: build it somewhere else so that not as many people (including us, of course) are affected by the downsides of hosting an electricity generating facility. This is the paradox of NIMBY liberalism. For Republicans, there is no paradox; they don’t even pretend to care about the bottom socioeconomic percentiles.

As a side note, it might be worth considering that the house-poor are not uniformly enamoured with the prospect of being consigned to a lifetime of vertical housing. Politicians routinely say that it just isn’t feasible for everyone to expect, at minimum, a single-family dwelling even if it’s only on a postage stamp-sized plot of green

grass. Apparently, ever-higher apartment towers are more feasible, bringing to mind the miles-high towers of science fiction. Why shouldn't it be an urgent matter to find a way out of the economic segregation of vertical housing? And maybe cities aren't the answer for where to put people. Not everyone enjoys being armpit to armpit with the rest of the world. When wealth permits it, people do cherish a place to get away to. An apartment on the 150th floor might not be that place for everyone.

According to the authors, "The problem we faced in the 1970s was that we were building too much and too heedlessly. The problem we face in the 2020s is that we are building too little and we are too often paralyzed by process." This leads to the next chapter on Governance. The regulatory state was ushered in to control industry's wanton neglect of the environment, safety and workers. Ironically, with respect to the environment, it was Richard Nixon, a Republican, who asked rhetorically, "The great question of the seventies is, shall we surrender to our surroundings, or shall we make our peace with nature and begin to make reparations for the damage we have done to our air, to our land, and to our water?" In addition to regulatory supervision, Ralph Nader led the fight in the courts to challenge corporate America on consumer safety and environmental pollution. As a result of legislation, regulation and judicial oversight, the authors report that "Between 1970 and 2020, the combined emissions of the six most common pollutants—which include lead, carbon monoxide, and sulfur dioxide—dropped by roughly 80 percent. New cars, SUVs, and trucks that run on gas today are more than 99 percent cleaner than in 1970."

However, the regulatory state can be a double-edged sword as the authors remind us, bringing us back to the 21st century. "[T]hose same laws and processes [are] available for anyone else to use, too. You can bog clean energy projects down in environmental reviews. You can use a process meant to stop the government from

building a highway through your town to keep a nonprofit developer from building affordable housing down the block." Referring to Republican opposition, they write "It was as if the right had studied the tactics of Nader's Raiders and adopted them for their own purposes." And NIMBYism, it turns out, is not just opposed to the 'dirty energy' of oil pipelines and electric transmission lines running through their communities; NIMBYists also object to and resist the location of nearby large-scale clean energy projects, e.g., energy farms of wind turbines and solar panels.

Next, the authors turn their attention to scientific invention and the equally important deployment of new scientific discoveries—both stages being essential for sustained economic growth. The authors argue that science must be backed by government investment as the private sector is unwilling to assume large projects with uncertain timelines and 'unforecastable' profits. The size, complexity, duration and riskiness of grand science projects, therefore, becomes the business of government. They cite the Apollo space program as a classic example and then proceed to a more general assessment, noting that "When you use an iPhone, you are playing with a technology that bundles silicon chips, the internet, GPS, voice-recognition software, and multi-touch technology, which were in part funded by the Defense Department, NIH, the National Science Foundation, and other government entities." In other words, government does much of the upfront research that the corporate world is then able to use (for free) to generate profits. Under the present administration, this model is under attack from the 'efficiency experts', who incidentally have themselves profited immensely from government research. And then there are the subsidies, tax breaks and the entire communication and transportation infrastructure that undergirds modern American commerce—all paid for by the American taxpayer. This sort of big government does not offend Republicans, who often counter that government assistance to business ultimately enables the private sector to perform the public

service of creating jobs. This, as if to say, that businessmen are benevolent and are not always on the lookout for lower-cost input alternatives to labour when and where possible.

Where the authors challenge government to do more—much more—is in extending theoretical scientific knowledge to commercial applications. They note that the lead role played by American scientists in nuclear and solar energy and lithium batteries was not followed up by ambitious innovation to transform scientific understanding into applied science. As a result, technological applications developed by European and Asian countries have surpassed the U.S. They conclude that

> Politics should take technology more seriously. Innovation can make impossible problems possible to solve, and policy can make impossible technologies possible to create. The fundamental link between the two is not at the core of the Democratic or the Republican agenda. Instead, we are stuck between a progressive movement that is too afraid of growth and a conservative movement that is allergic to government intervention.

Thus, both agendas miss the larger point, which is that "[Government] needs to justify itself not through the rules it follows but through the outcomes it delivers." The obsession with process is characteristic of Democratic programs, while a 'stated' aversion to government intervention is foundational for Republicans. In neither case are the parties ready to assume the responsibility of creating what the authors suggest might be termed the 'entrepreneurial state'—this being an American answer to Chinese state capitalism.

Whether this new 'state' will be autocratic, plutocratic or democratic (with blemishes) seems to be an open question. The Chinese system has recently demonstrated great economic success in an

autocratic society. An American system of autocratic government might be less centralized owing to its federal structure of government, but the verdict is still out on how America's recent turn to authoritarian presidentialism will evolve, especially in the near term. Cynics from the Left might consider *Abundance* to represent a refurbished political economy for the upper middle class that is nevertheless ideologically repelled by the MAGA movement. They might ask whether we are simply getting more of Ronald Reagan's trickle-down social order repackaged for liberal consumption. From the Right, the criticism might conjure up images of Soviet state planning—presumably this group would be more amenable to post-Soviet Russian 'kleptocapitalism.' And so, grudging support from the highest socioeconomic percentiles might be forthcoming if the income/wealth gap is not threatened by socialized redistribution and as the opportunities for self-enrichment become more apparent.

Through the Grapevine: Socially Transmitted Information and Distorted Democracy by Taylor Carlson was published four months before the 2024 U.S. presidential election, and looking back the book does offer some insights into that election. Carlson is Associate Professor of Political Science at Washington University in St. Louis. In this her latest book, Carlson makes the case that the social transmission of political information(1) is, and always has been, an important means of political communication. She goes further and maintains that it is "a dominant way in which people [learn] about politics." Though she never outright defines the term, for her the grapevine is all of that interpersonal communication that takes place on/in conversations, gossip, church, craft guilds, barbershops, watercooler talk, phone calls, chat rooms, AOL Instant Messenger, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok and the like. Observing that political communication via the grapevine has mostly been neglected in academic studies, she attempts a foray into this relatively uncharted region of studies and encourages further research to extend her preliminary work.

In her analysis, Carlson relies on the standard two-step social transmission of political information. In the first step, news media initially present information to the public, after which, what Carlson terms the 'actively informed' share the information downstream among their peers—friends, relatives, acquaintances as well as people they bump into on social media. The 'casually informed,' she classifies as those who get their political news mainly through social interaction rather than directly from mainstream news organizations.

In her own words, Carlson writes,

> In this book, I argue that learning about politics through the proverbial grapevine fuels distorted democracy. Distorted democracy is marked by an underinformed, polarized, but engaged public, driven by changes to the information environment created by members of the public. As people discuss what they read in the news, the information exchanged in conversations becomes distorted: it becomes sparse, cloaked in partisan bias, less accurate, and more mobilizing relative to the information initially communicated by the news. This means that when individuals primarily learn about politics from others instead of the news, they are likely to be exposed to distorted information that can affect their decision making. Specifically, individuals could learn less, believe more misinformation, and develop more polarized policy preferences, but engage more in politics.

As indicated in the quote, Carlson is especially interested in studying the causes of distorted news that occurs between and among people. She notes that most research in the field to date has focused on distortions of the news during the first step of information transmission, i.e., from news producers, typically originating with journalists and editors, to news consumers. The second step is what Carlson intends to address—the sharing of news in mostly informal social settings.

Curiously, Carlson believes the distortion of information is significant in the second stage, while at the same time acknowledging that it is difficult to quantify. One obvious limitation of her studies is that only social media tweets and replies are analyzed as real-world political conversations. Analyzing the full spectrum of political conversations, e.g., including bidirectional messaging on complex issues would be an order of magnitude beyond tweets. Just imagining how researchers could access troves of private (and even public) communication raises nightmarish privacy issues. Collecting real-world communications data, while respecting personal privacy,

is one of the challenges prompting her advocacy for greater collaborative work from her peers to complement her telephone game experiments.(2)

What cannot be forgotten in focusing on grapevine information distortions is that news media groups still set the talk agenda. And, one glance at this editorial cartoon by Lalo Alcaraz in the *CALÓ News* speaks volumes about the media bias in favour of sensationalist news, which has a long history in America. This particular cartoon illustrates how the news media often obsess about isolated instances of high drama and violence to the exclusion of the vast expression of grievances that political violence exploits.

©2025 Lalo Alcaraz / CALÓ News.
Cartoon appears courtesy of Lalo Alcaraz and CALÓ News.

And it isn't just the yellow or tabloid media. For tens of millions, graphic images of violence can be consumed and related over and over again through the grapevine without having to think . . . of con-

text. This is the media playing to the paying audience, and there's nothing new here.(3)

In addition, there is the partisanship of news organization, also not new to the stage in America. A fellow social scientist, Omar Wasow, Assistant Professor of Political Science at UC Berkely, in an interview with *Politico* posted on June 11th shares the following comments:

> Not to sound too technical, but what's going on in Los Angeles is what's called in social science a "contentious event." It's not just contentious in the sense the National Guard and LAPD are in conflict with local protesters. It's contentious in the sense that it gets read very differently by different constituencies. When I went to Fox News over the weekend, its language was, "'Riots are gripping Los Angeles." Conversely, other headlines emphasize a military-style crackdown.

It is interesting and perhaps noteworthy that loaded language is so common that it is often difficult to identify. Even Carlson uses the term 'insurrection' to describe the events in the Washington, D.C. on January 6th, 2021. But a term that seems accurate to this reviewer would be rejected out of hand by a large part of America's citizenry who have seemingly convinced themselves that this was an historic act of American patriotism in defiance of an oppressive and illegitimate government.

With her inimitable style, Hannah Arendt speaks to this phenomenon of being unable/unwilling to distinguish between true and false statements in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* where she writes

> In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world the masses had reached the point where they would, at the same time, believe everything and nothing, think that everything was

> possible and that nothing was true. The mixture in itself was remarkable enough, because it spelled the end of the illusion that gullibility was a weakness of unsuspecting primitive souls and cynicism the vice of superior and refined minds. Mass propaganda discovered that its audience was ready at all times to believe the worst, no matter how absurd, and did not particularly object to being deceived because it held every statement to be a lie anyhow. The totalitarian mass leaders based their propaganda on the correct psychological assumption that, under such conditions, one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism; instead of deserting the leaders who had lied to them, they would protest that they had known all along that the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness.

One such example of this sort of fantastic turnaround is provided in President Trump's recent decision to exempt the 'good illegals' in the agricultural sector. In the June 14th article entitled 'Inside Trump's Extraordinary Turnaround on Immigration Raids' in the *New York Times*, Representative Tony Gonzalez, Republican of Texas, is quoted with this memorable pronouncement regarding the ICE raids on American farms:

> We all need to focus on convicted criminal aliens. If we focus there and we're not going after the milker of cows who's, you know, in 103-degree weather, going after that guy and we're going after the convicted criminal, I think we're on the right path.

This sort of knee-jerk realignment demonstrates that the unflinching loyalty to the leader that was so evident in the Nazi Germany of Arendt's day lives on—unmindful and unembarrassed— in 21st century America.

The purpose of this diversion into media bias and political history should make clear just how high the hurdle is for Carlson as she argues that the distortion of political information in everyday communication may be a threat to democracy. She never goes so far as to suggest that the distortion of political communication in the U.S. has resulted in a dysfunctional democracy. The one noteworthy instance of the distortion of reality producing gross political dysfunction is the January 6th insurrection. She argues that the rarity of such episodes is evidence that the U.S. has not descended into dysfunction. Unfortunately, she does not define exactly what she means by dysfunction, but she makes clear that she means more than simply "a situation in which a large group of Americans are ill informed but politically engaged." This is as if to say that the problem is not in and of itself that Americans are politically ill informed. What becomes problematic is when the ill informed become politically engaged.(4)

Having invoked Nazi totalitarianism, one has to wonder just how bad the distortion of political communication has to get before the U.S. approaches the dysfunctional stage of democracy.

Carlson repeats *ad nauseam* these exact words—"sparse, more biased, less accurate, and more mobilizing"—to characterize and emphasize how communication in the second step is impeded by ordinary people. She believes that consumers of mainstream news will tend to render less complete and less accurate information when they communicate with their peers. And, their cognitive and partisan biases will change the original news content, and generally speaking, their communication will be more likely to prompt their peers to engage politically, e.g., vote, contact a lawmaker, donate to a campaign, add their name to a mailing list, sign a petition or attend a protest.

Notwithstanding the biases that exist in the news media, Carlson contends that we are responsible for re-presenting the news to suit our own political preferences. We edit and omit, use loaded terms and often incite others to action. It is here that Carlson makes one of her better points when she writes that “everyday people, not just the media or political elites, share some responsibility for shaping attitude polarization,” adding that “Just as journalists have a responsibility to communicate accurate, objective information to the public, so too do the actively informed have a responsibility to communicate accurate, objective information to their peers.”

On the whole the book is a useful but trying read for someone not accustomed to the language and logic of social science experiments. For example, when talking about confirmation bias, Carlson relies considerably on conditional language, e.g., modals of conditionality such as ‘can,’ ‘could,’ ‘might,’ ‘may’ and other conditional terms such as ‘likely’ and ‘perhaps.’ This doesn't instill confidence in the scientific claims of the author when talking about psychological phenomena such as cognitive biases. Second, in addition to the repetitive use of language, Carlson’s writing is filled with what appear to be excessive citations. This latter point reflects badly on a work that seems to be trying too hard to pass itself off as science—a common enough trap in the social sciences. It reads more like speculative theorizing.

Nevertheless, the topic is interesting and worthy of further consideration. A better and more accessible introduction might be an interview with Yanna Krupnikov, Professor of Communication and Media at the University of Michigan. The interview can be found at https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/18/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-yanna-krupnikov.html. In the interview, Ezra Klein and Krupnikov discuss not the differences between the Left and the Right in American politics but the divide between the actively involved and the

casually involved. Incidentally, Krupnikov recommended *Through the Grapevine* before it was actually published.

Endnotes

(1) The political information that Carlson refers to is specific to the U.S. and focused on domestic issues of national scope. Hers is a very general study that excludes regional, urban/rural, gender, age, ethnocultural variation, socioeconomic status, etc. For the purpose of her studies as related here, there are only two groups in society: the actively informed and the casually informed, and it is unclear where the continuum is divided to distinuish one from the other.

(2) The following is an oversimplified account of Carlson's telephone game experiments, but it captures their essence. In Carlson's experiments, one person is given a news article from a nonpartisan publication and asked to read and summarize it for another person. Researchers then compare the news article and the text summary for completeness, accuracy, bias and call to action.

(3) An excellent read, *The First Casualty* by Phillip Knightley, documents media collusion with political and military leaders to distort the truth of what happens in war. It is aptly subtitled, *The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq*. An argument can be made that the same collaboration is at work in reporting domestic unrest. It doesn't take a social scientist to figure out the motivation for sensational journalism.

(4) Just who should be allowed to participate in a democracy is a philosophical question that Italo Calvino explores in his 1953 short story, 'The Watcher.' My review of that story appears in my recently published book, *Artifacts of a Troubled and Troublesome Species* (2025).

Quinn Slobodian, a Canadian, is a professor of international history at Boston University having previously taught at Wellesley College, both private institutions. Two points need emphasizing. First, for all of his scholarship, Slobodian is a historian not an economist, and his focus is on the convergence of politics and economics, which generally aligns with the real world most of us live in but which runs counter to Economics proper. Second, his research and teaching background are in private not public higher education. This latter point is relevant as he is a partisan in the clash of two economic traditions each comprised of its own elites—the laissez-faire schools of which neoliberalism is a prominent strain and the interventionists whose 20th century lineage traces back to the Keynesians. Both traditions ultimately impact us, the general public.

The term neoliberalism can be confusing especially given all the 'neos' in the world today. The neoliberalism that Slobodian writes about gives prominence to the market in resolving the allocation of society's scarce resources. According to this view, things only get fouled up when nonmarket forces, notably government (democracy), intervene to change (correct) market outcomes. Another way to put it is to contrast neoliberalism with the Keynesian tradition. The latter finds its origins in combating the massive unemployment of the Great Depression and subsequent recessions (downturns) in the boom-bust business cycle. But, for neoliberals, markets, if unimpeded, don't fail. Markets will eventually clear, meaning that the unemployed will find jobs, if the costs of labour (wages, salaries, benefits, pension plans, etc.) fall far enough. Look no further than Javier Milei's Argentina to see the latest real-life experiment with full-throttle neoliberalism.

This is the third book by Quinn Slobodian that I have reviewed in the past two years. The first is *The Globalists: End of Empire and*

the Birth of Neoliberalism and the second *Crack-Up Capitalism: Market Radicals and the Dream of World Without Democracy*. Both reviews were published in my *Writings Near the End of the Human Era* in 2023. Like Slobodian's previous two books, this one has a provocative title*, Hayek's Bastards: Race, Gold and the Capitalism of the Far Right*.

In *Globalists*, Slobodian traces the genealogy of neoliberalism back to the Austrian school of economics, focusing on Ludwig von Mises and his student, Friedrich von Hayek. The reader is brought up to date in *Crack-Up Capitalism* with the anarcho-capitalists who believe that the state can be replaced by private economic zones, akin to those special economic zones worldwide that are exempt from onerous environmental and labour regulations but are still entitled to state funding as well as the social and physical infrastructure of the state. The reader can locate the South African billionaires, Peter Thiel and Elon Musk, in this company. In *Hayek's Bastards*, Slobodian introduces us to the new fusionism(1) of economic *laissez-faire* and the eugenics of race and intelligence. Ludwig von Mises institutes, headquartered in Auburn, Alabama, have spread around the world, marketing this latest variant of neoliberalism. Prominent figures include Lew Rockwell, Murray Rothbard and Hans-Hermann Hoppe. Slobodian regards these new neoliberals as the illegitimate offspring of *laissez-faire* tradition, but the reader can judge for themselves.

In the Introduction, which Slobodian entitles 'Volk Capital,' Hayek's bastards are characterized as follows,

> This book argues that the appeal to nature was a central part of the neoliberal solution to a problem they faced in the decades after the Cold War. This was an era in which communism was dead but, as they put it, Leviathan lived on. Public spending continued to expand even as capital-

> ism became the only surviving economic system. . . . Confounded by persistent demands for the redress of inequality at the expense of efficiency, stability, and order, neoliberals turned to nature in matters of race, intelligence, territory, and money as a way to erect a bulwark against the encroaching demands of progressives and hopefully roll back social changes to return to a hierarchy of gender, race, and cultural difference they imagined to be rooted in genetics as well as tradition.

The term 'Volk Capital' is used purposefully instead of human capital to make clear that the labour source in the neoliberal's ideal world had a hereditary component, which means that science of inheritance (genetics)—what else but white supremacy (a.k.a. christian ethnonationalism or western civilization)—is invited in through the back door. *Voilà*, we're back in the hot sun of the July cotton fields of 19th century Alabama.

Except that now, the cotton fields are harvested by machines, and the mechanization of production throughout the economy makes millions redundant. The new fusionists concept of labour had to change. It had to "focus on the extra-economic cultural prerequisites for a functioning market society . . . [an] ethno-economy," which "involved the recasting of humanity into 'cognitive classes,' or what I call neurocastes, as intelligence was asserted as the new sorting mechanism for a postindustrial society." This may sound familiar—Elon and his youthful prodigies in the Department of Government Efficiency?

So why is Slobodian worth reading? Well, he is one of the leading scholars who has studied the intellectual history of neoliberalism which is, according to him, stripping Economics naked of its democratic capitalist garb and its pretense of scientific objectivity. Much has been written recently about capitalism's having grown detached

from democracy, and there is no shortage of criticisms of the arcane science of economics, its alleged value-neutrality and its longstanding subservience to political interests other than the demos. Several of those texts are referenced in my reviews of *Globalists* and *Crack-Up Capitalism* published my *Writings Near the End of the Human Era* (2023).

Shocking as it may seem, there are no empty seats on the opposite side of the aisle from Slobodian. From Alabama, the Ludwig von Mises Institute world headquarters has found a welcoming home in the Loveliest Village on the Plains. Among other criticisms, Slobodian may be dismissed as a pop economist, as did one of my former Economics professors at Auburn University when speaking of John Kenneth Galbraith (alas, a liberal and a Canadian). Galbraith's notions of countervailing power and the frenzied greed that precipitated the 1929 stock market crash did little to endear him to economists of a conservative political persuasion. Incidentally, both notions are as relevant now as they were in his writings more than 70 years ago. And for an excellent literary exposition of the 1929 crash and its participants, see Hernán Díaz's *Trust* reviewed in my *Artifacts of a Troubled and Troublesome Species* (2025).

But what should be the most compelling reason for reading Slobodian now is that the new neoclassical fusionists are in the American government. So, who are they—these vocal opponents of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Emancipation Proclamation—and where do they want to take America? Just think back to the fundamental tenets of neoliberalism's new fusionism—an unfettered market, the end of democratic control of capitalism, the superiority of intelligence markers, cultural Christianity and closed borders. Essentially, government stripped of the role in balancing the needs and interests of the market against those of society at large. In other words, government in the service of private wealth, rather than government as the countervailing power of

the demos, the people. This may seem to be much ado about nothing, but during the early days of the second Trump administration, one sees that there is so much further plutocratic oligarchy(2) can be extended to control American society by eviscerating democracy and any pretensions to political egalitarianism.

Endnotes

(1) Slobodian identifies the new fusionism as beginning in the 1990s . . . after the spectre of communism had been beaten back. He describes it as the New Right's [melding of] libertarianism and religious traditionalism in the style of William F. Buckley and the *National Review*" with "arguments borrowed from cognitive, behavioral, and evolutionary psychology and in some cases genetics, genomics, and biological anthropology." With its new armour of science, neoliberalism was ready to take on the surfeited state.

(2) Already, the crowds are being entertained with highly-publicized jousting matches featuring feigned rival oligarchs—President Trump and Elon Musk at the time of this writing. The news media worldwide have picked up on the feud between these two über-oligarchs, and while ostensibly detached and objective, these news organizations have every financial incentive in the world to be 'fight promoters'—the Don Kings of American politics in 2025.

July 4, 2025 **SENT BY EMAIL**

The Right Honourable Mark Carney
Prime Minister of Canada
Office of the Prime Minister
Mark.Carney@parl.gc.ca

The Honourable Anita Anand
Minister of Foreign Affairs
Anita.Anand@parl.gc.ca

Subject: The Ongoing Crisis in Gaza

Dear Prime Minister Carney and Minister Anand:

We are nearing the two-year anniversary of Hamas' brutal attack on October 7th that specifically, though not exclusively, targeted Israeli civilians. The attack is an outrage, and it demonstrates the callous disregard that Hamas has not only for Israelis but also for Palestinian lives, because Hamas knew—how could they not—that Israel would immediately launch a massive retaliatory assault against Gaza and that it would be the civilians in Gaza who would bear the brunt of the Israeli response. Hamas leaders are sadistic but they are not stupid, and they had to know that the Americans would, as always, provide unconditional military and diplomatic support for Israel. All that has come to pass since, as anyone familiar with Israel and the Occupied Territories, could have predicted.

Israel with its hi-tech 21st century military has easily destroyed Gaza to the point that President Trump during the exhilarating first 90 days of his return to the White House floated the trial balloon that Gaza should be completely gutted and emptied of Palestinians and

subsequently rebuilt as a vibrant Mediterranean resort area (a Levantine Riviera). Last year, Jared Kushner, son-in-law and advisor to President Trump, spoke of the valuable waterfront property in Gaza. Buried in this delirious optimism of a massive commercial opportunity to rebuild with some vague U.S. guarantees on real estate development are the inhabitants who crouch in the shadows beneath the rubble of their cities and towns hoping the U.S. bombs and bullets delivered by the IDF will somehow miss them just one more day. In the meantime, the shuffling around of the civilian population from one danger zone to an only slightly less dangerous zone may be nearing an end—one that should not be surprising to anyone paying attention. That end is the exodus—not the Old Testament exodus but the here-and-now forced departure of Palestinians, a second Nakba, from their homeland to refugee camps in whatever countries will have them. This should not be news. But for a refresher, this is what Max Rodenbeck, Project Director for Israel/Palestine at the International Crisis Group and formerly Bureau Chief for *The Economist* in the Middle East, reminds us in 'Gaza Without Gazans' published on www.foreignaffairs.com on June 25th, referring to Israel's endgame.

Hamas chose its path and gambled the lives of upwards of two million Palestinians in order to win a public relations war with the international community. Certainly Palestinians (even members of Hamas, bizarrely enough) have received enormous moral and tangible support (when it has been allowed by Israel) from people around the world. And Israel's image in the world has been horribly eroded by the manner in which Prime Minister Netanyahu and his radical right wing war cabinet have conducted this war. (Incidentally, the relationship between Netanyahu and his far right followers closely, and frighteningly, resembles the relationship between President Trump and his MAGA cult following.) Israel's defense is and always has been self-defense, the right of a sovereign state to use violence to defend itself against enemies external and internal. The

great danger is when all means are justified. (This bit of wisdom still eludes America after its two most recent failed wars in Asia post-9/11 and its abridgement of civil liberties at home.) Barbara Tuchman, in *The Guns of August*, quotes Mehmed Talaat, de facto head of the Ottoman Empire, from an editorial he wrote in a German newspaper in 1916:

> We have been blamed for not making a distinction between guilty and innocent Armenians. [To do so] was impossible. Because of the nature of things, one who was still innocent today could be guilty tomorrow. The concern for the safety of Turkey simply had to silence all other concerns.

The words may be somewhat different from what we hear and read from Netanyahu's government, but the reasoning and the conclusion are practically identical. Today, the genocide against Armenians is not that well known in North America. It is not familiar in the way the Holocaust still is. And so many others that occurred in the 20th century are falling away from our collective memory. What is happening in Gaza should not slip away and be forgotten, especially considering all of the conventions that have been signed since World War II regarding international humanitarian law.

In a cruel irony, the genocide label has been used against Israel on account of how it has waged war on the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. Prime Minister, you have been urged to regard Israel's conduct during the war against Gaza as genocide, which to date you have not been willing to do. On January 23rd, 2024 I wrote to Prime Minister Trudeau and Foreign Minister Joly and expressed the hope that Canada would perform due diligence in considering the genocide charges that have been filed against Israel in the International Court of Justice. The Americans have prejudged the case, but I hope that Canada will demonstrate its full and complete sovereignty by breaking with the U.S. if the evidence supports the

genocide charges. President Trump will pressure you to ‘go along.’ Canadians have witnessed how that works. But, while the U.S. may have done with the international order, Canada has not and cannot afford to. By now, I think that intelligent and informed Canadians realize that the Americans do not intend to annex Canada—what a foolish idea. What they will do is continue to chip away at Canadian sovereignty even more aggressively than in the past. The political and economic subordination of Canada to the U.S. will be sufficient.

In the meantime, in the interest of representing Canada on the world stage and defending the international order, imperfect as it is, you and Foreign Minister Anand can and should work harder with Canada’s allies to restrain the IDF from engaging in vengeful war crimes (whether committed by lethal munitions or the denial of food, water, sanitation, electricity and medical care) and oppose the forced displacement of Palestinians to camps outside the Strip. This much should have been obvious on October 8th, and I challenged CUPE, the union that represents my workplace, to lobby the Trudeau government along these lines instead of praising Hamas.

Furthermore, as the leaders of Canada’s foreign policy, you should promote the idea among Canadian allies and the Canadian public that the misery of starving, maimed, bloodied, homeless and unarmed Palestinians points directly to President Trump’s personal failure to bring the war to end. As much as Hamas and Netanyahu are responsible for the horror show in Gaza, the blood is now on President Trump’s hands for every U.S.-manufactured bomb, bullet and weapons delivery system used by Israel against Palestinian civilians.

Sincerely,

Peter McMillan

About the Author

Peter McMillan lives with his wife and Lottie, their flat-coated retriever, on the northwest shore of Lake Ontario, and in addition to writing he teaches English